Shisi's
Little Mushroom
REVELATIONS
translated by: Xiao

LITTLE MUSHROOM

VOLUME TWO

SHISI

TRANSLATED BY

XIAO

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BOOK THREE: REVELATIONS

28

“REGARDLESS OF WHETHER IT WAS THE OUTER CITY OR THE MAIN CITY, TRIALS WERE CONSTANTLY TAKING PLACE.”

THERE WERE VIRTUALLY no people on the stairs, or perhaps there were only a handful of people rushing about—fewer than usual. Traversing the stairs was something that took up energy. An Zhe took a deep breath, still straining a bit. When solar winds directly struck the earth, the atmosphere would be blown away at a frightening rate and disperse in the cosmos. Although it had only been a few days, the oxygen levels in the air provided by the vents were clearly not enough. The military announcements also reminded people every day to cut down on going outside along with unnecessary physical exertion.

At the first-floor corridor, the atmosphere was even more solemn, with not a person in sight. An Zhe recalled the words "go back soon" the patrolling Judge said to him, so he increased his pace and returned to the Trial Court's territory. The doctor was typing away at a computer in the main hall. Upon seeing An Zhe, he said, "You've finally returned. Where did you go?"

"Out for a walk," An Zhe said.

He sat down next to the doctor. Dr. Ji was a very warm person; over the past few days their relationship had become quite good.

"Don't run around," the doctor said. "At least not today."

"Did something happen?" An Zhe asked.

The doctor's gaze moved away from the computer screen to look at him, his complexion containing a hint of fatigue and his lips pale. In his azure eyes was a fathomless and deep emotion that was by no means positive. He pushed a bottle of water toward An Zhe. "Are you thirsty?"

An Zhe shook his head, for he was fine—although mushrooms were organisms that needed water very much, today his spore returned to his body, so he felt very secure; his need for water did not seem so pressing.

"All supplies are in critical states. Never mind food and water, there's not even enough oxygen," the doctor murmured. "Today at the very latest, the military will have to transfer personnel. If you returned late and missed the transfer, you'd only be able to remain here."

An Zhe was slightly confused.

"Transfer to where?" he said. He thought the Lighthouse was the final refuge.

The doctor's gaze was fixed on the blank white wall in front as he said, "The Garden of Eden."

"That place is the crop breeding center, with a stable food supply and vast reserves of clean water. The base's resources are all there," the doctor said.

After saying that, he smiled. "The Garden of Eden's name was chosen well. Now it truly has become the final Garden of Eden."

"When the Garden of Eden was initially built, there were voices of opposition. The breeding and cultivation of crops, drinking water supply, the raising of children… With the cores of so many resources essential to the existence of humankind concentrated in one place, even if it is extremely beneficial to the Garden of Eden, would it bring greater risks?" The doctor lowered his voice. "But the facts invariably proved that the base's capabilities had limits. When facing great catastrophes, all of humankind's resources could only be supplied to the Garden of Eden alone.

We must keep it even if we sacrifice everything. If the Garden of Eden does not exist, then humankind will likewise be lost."

An Zhe understood what the doctor meant. The Garden of Eden was where the mothers and children were.

As he looked at the doctor, he asked, "Will everyone go?"

The doctor glanced at An Zhe, who found it very difficult to describe the meaning of that gaze. It was like that of a Garden of Eden dormitory teacher looking at a wayward and naive student, but in addition, there were also hints of mournfulness and sorrow.

So An Zhe knew the answer, and he said nothing.

The morning thus went by in silence. Seraing returned once, but he was in a rush, for his work was very busy.

"I have to stay here until evening." He looked at An Zhe. "The Emergency Response Department doesn't recognize you. Follow me."

The doctor said, "You can just leave it to me, I won't leave him behind."

Seraing thought for a moment, then said, "Okay."

Outside, the gusting winds did not cease for even a moment. This inexorable force from the cosmos rocked the entire human city, and the cyclones whipped up on the earth by the solar winds surpassed all disasters in recorded history. When An Zhe put his fingers to the wall, he could feel its slight tremors that were akin to a dying animal's final struggling breaths. In fact, for human creations to be able to endure for so long in such a tremendous windstorm, An Zhe felt that it was a miracle.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, someone knocked on the large door. It was a group of heavily armed officers led by three civil service officers with Emergency Response Department badges pinned to their chests. Upon seeing Dr. Ji, the officer standing at the very front gave a slight nod. "Doctor, please come with us."

The doctor asked, "Have the transfers begun?"

"Yes. It's estimated that five hundred people will be transferred," the officer said. "The military will do all in its power to ensure your safety. We've already made arrangements for your accommodations in the Garden of Eden."

"Thank you," the doctor said.

But a moment later, he looked at An Zhe. "But he has to come with me."

"According to the transfer plan, you may bring one assistant." The officer then said to An Zhe, "Please produce your ID card so that we can verify your identity."

"My assistant is no longer with us." The doctor draped an arm over An Zhe's shoulder and smiled as he said to An Zhe, "It seems that your ID card is not on you."

An Zhe said, "I only have the Colonel's."

The doctor said, "Give it to them."

An Zhe obediently took out Lu Feng's ID card. The officer took it and swiped it on the portable machine—then he clearly was stunned.

"For the base, Lu Feng went to the Underground City, and there is still no news even now." The doctor raised his eyebrows and said in a leisurely manner, "If his kid can't receive the right to asylum… I believe that isn't very appropriate."

The officer frowned. Only after walking to one side and dialing a number did he return and say, "An exception can be made for his transfer. His status will be your assistant."

The doctor said, "Thank you."

"See?" the doctor said to An Zhe as they walked through the corridor. "If you ran around in the morning and came back late—"

An Zhe pursed his lips, catching sight of the state of affairs in the main hall.

Tens of researchers in white coats formed simple lines, with military soldiers nearby guarding them. A woman was saying very agitatedly, "My assistant must come with me. I refuse to accept such a transfer plan."

The officer said, "In the transfer plan, you do not have an allowance for an assistant, Dr. Chen."

"My research can't do without my assistant, for those tasks cannot be completed alone. Moreover, his achievements are by no means inferior to mine. He can independently manage large-scale projects as well." The woman referred to as "Dr. Chen" said loudly, "Please request instructions from the higher-ups."

"If you believe there is no way to continue your research after losing your assistant," the officer said, his voice ice-cold and merciless, "you may have to remain here."

After a brief stupor, she fell silent.

An Zhe followed Dr. Ji in another direction. There seemed to be disputes upstairs as well, for he heard the sounds of heavy objects falling to the ground.

An exit had been opened up on the first floor of the United Front building. There, An Zhe got into the military's heavy armored vehicle. When he got on, he caught a brief glimpse of the scenery outside. The sunlight was so glaring it could almost burn his retinas, the parched and scorching air rampaged through his lungs, and grit got all over him. The formerly smooth ground was covered with deep ravines, as if it had been torn up in a frenzy by the claws of huge monsters.

All around were the sounds of people breathing. This vehicle left with thirty people on board. According to the people nearby, for this transfer, the Lighthouse had a quota of only five hundred people in total, which was less than one-tenth of all the staff members.

Someone asked, "What about our equipment and materials?"

"After we leave, power will be cut off to the entirety of the Lighthouse, the laboratories will be rated based on importance, and the important samples will be transferred to the Garden of Eden for continued preservation," someone replied.

With a "bang," the vehicle doors dropped, and the armored vehicle started up. The interior of the vehicle was dark and silent, and the doctor held his hand.

An Zhe suddenly felt that this scene was incomparably familiar. One month ago, within the overwhelming insect swarm, he had also boarded the military's truck in this manner, arrived at District Six, and accepted the Judgment Day trial. It was just that in the dark vehicle back then, the one who held his hand was Poet. Now it was the doctor. And back then, the standard for whether or not people could enter District Six was if they had not been infected. This time, the standard for whether or not people could enter the Garden of Eden was if their past, current, and future contributions to the base were sufficient.

Regardless of whether it was the Outer City or the Main City, trials were constantly taking place.

The distance traveled was very short. Coincidentally, he and the doctor were placed at the end of the sixth floor, where he had once taught children to recite poems. At the Garden of Eden, he had his first proper lunch in recent days, a bowl of potato soup. Although it was not as delicious as his own cooking, after eating hardtack and nutrition tablets for several days, it was practically a rare delicacy.

The doctor seemed careworn. In the evening, An Zhe went out to get water for him.

There were people in the break room. The woman who had clashed with the officer from earlier in the day was sobbing while facing the wall, and next to her was another researcher who patted her on the shoulder. "Perhaps the Lighthouse can endure."

"It's impossible." Her voice was raspy. "The oxygen content of the earth's air is less than half of what it originally was. After the air filtration system is started up, fresh oxygen will be preferentially delivered to the Garden of Eden only. The residential areas, military bases, and even the Twin Towers all come second in terms of oxygen supply. They won't be able to endure."

Then she lifted her head and spotted An Zhe. She asked softly, "Who are you? Are you also one of our people?"

The researcher next to her said, "It's said that he's the assistant of the testing center's Dr. Ji."

"Dr. Ji could bring an assistant…" she murmured. "It's because his achievements are superior to ours."

"Those are just the facts," the researcher said. "Don't be sad over him. If we can survive this calamity, we can train new assistants."

The tip of her nose was red, and her eyes were watery with tears. Upon hearing those words, she let out a "hah," then covered her entire face and trembled all over.

"You think…" she said, "that I'm merely… merely sad because of just my assistant?"

"The Main City's residents were thankful that they were not part of those who were abandoned when the Outer City was bombed," she said brokenly. "But they were still abandoned. We're able to stand here today in exchange for the sacrifices of everyone else in the Lighthouse… But perhaps we'll lose our qualification tomorrow. When the sea floods an island, the exposed portion will only decrease more and more. Time's almost up. What… What exactly are we holding on for? For the interests of all humankind?"

"For the interests of all humankind."

She bent double, violently panting as she said, "This age is killing people, but humankind itself has also been killing people.”

"But you must accept it, Dr. Chen Qing," the researcher said. "As the ones benefiting, we don't have the right to mourn for them."

"I know… It's just that, as humans just like them, it's emotionally difficult to accept." She made one last swipe at her tears and forced a smile. "Or are you going to say that we also don't have the right to have feelings?"

"… I don't know."

They spoke no more. An Zhe had finished getting the water, so he walked out of the break room with cup in hand. Upon lifting his head, he saw Seraing's figure flick past at one side of the corridor, opening the door to the room he and the doctor shared and entering—so he picked up his pace, wishing to greet Seraing.

The door hadn't been closed; a thread of light shone from within. An Zhe put his right hand on the door handle and was just about to push it open when he heard Seraing say, "Where's An Zhe?"

"He transferred together with me," the doctor said. "Are you looking for him?"

"Was he with you the entire time?" Seraing asked. "I just received a call from the Emergency Response Department. The important sample from Laboratory D1344 that was to be transferred has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" the doctor said. "That sample with a connection to Lu Feng? It was a very strange thing. If it died and then evaporated into the air, I would not be surprised."

An Zhe's heart rate skyrocketed. With fingers trembling, he swiftly turned and walked to the other side of the corridor.

"Not necessarily," Seraing said. "The reason why the Emergency Response Department looked for me was because the instrument recorded some operations at 6 a.m., and the operator was the Colonel. Where is An Zhe? I must find him."

"He went to get water," the doctor said.

"Thank you." There was a sound from the door, and Seraing walked out.

Standing behind the wall around the corner, An Zhe tightened his grip on the water cup.

He knew he would be discovered someday, but he didn't know that the day would arrive so quickly.

The two researchers in the break room had seen him, and very soon, Seraing would come this way. He could not let himself be found.

After becoming acutely aware of this, An Zhe looked all around the corridor, searching for a vent he could use. But then he realized that once he turned into hyphae, his clothes and ID card could only be left here to serve as damning proof.

With his chest heaving, An Zhe made the split-second decision to turn and run to the utility room at the end of this auxiliary corridor. There was a half-open small door there that led to an emergency exit corridor. There, he wouldn't be so quickly found, for up the stairs was another exit on the twenty-second floor that he and Lily had traversed once. So long as he found the same balcony as before, he'd be able to leave this building—or, find a hidden place to conceal himself. But he had to leave the sixth floor, and the further away he got, the better.

An Zhe found the small door without any difficulty. He went in, arriving at that dark staircase, and began to climb. This place seemed to be very close to the building's exterior. The wind was loud, generating drawn-out and ceaseless echoes, and the air was hot—the kind of damp heat that would suffocate humans.

In the dark, he could hear nothing save for the wind when he ran into something small.

An Zhe's initial reaction was to assume there were some inhuman monsters lurking here, but then his fingers touched smooth human hair, and he heard a child's violent gasp of fear.

He hesitated a moment. "Lily?"

"An Zhe?" Lily called out as well.

"It's me." An Zhe said.

"You've come!" Lily said. "I… I heard that the Twin Towers began the transfers, and I was just thinking of going to find you. Where's Si Nan? Was Si Nan transferred?"

"I don't know," An Zhe said. "They said that important samples would also be transferred here."

In the following second after these words were spoken, he suddenly recalled that xenogenics and monsters could now infect without making contact, so the Lighthouse might not let Si Nan enter the Garden of Eden.

But Lily seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Si Nan is definitely very important."

Barely recovered from her shock, she leaned against the stairs for a good while before saying, "Did you come to find me too?"

"No." An Zhe mulled over his words. "I came here to hide."

"Is someone trying to catch you?" Lily asked. Then she said, "It's very safe here."

An Zhe knew that Lily was a child who was different from other humans.

"I'm going to stay here for a few days." He stroked Lily's hair. "Can you not tell anyone else?"

The very next moment, the stairs were lit up bright as day, and glaring white light landed on Lily and him. Lily unconsciously screamed and pressed herself against him. He reached out a hand to protect this little girl, then raised his head.

In the bright white light stood Madam Lu, who was clad in a long white dress. They had previously met once before at the Lighthouse.

At Madam Lu's side were two Garden of Eden staff members with powerful flashlights.

"Lily." Madam Lu's gentle voice carried a hint of reproach. Although she was clearly speaking to Lily, her gaze was directed at An Zhe as she said softly, "Why are you still running around now?"

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“BUT HE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO GET WHAT HE WANTS.”

LILY SAID IN A SMALL VOICE, "I'm sorry, Madam, I'm just a bit worried about Si Nan."

"What is there that you can't talk to me about?" Madam Lu held out a hand to Lily, who obediently left An Zhe and allowed Madam Lu to hold her by the hand.

When they met last time at the Lighthouse, Madam Lu was wearing a mask, so An Zhe could only see her eyes. This time, he finally saw all of the Madam's facial features with all of their soft lines. Her eyebrows were curved, but when she was not smiling, her slightly thin lips were pursed a little, adding a trace of steadfast heroism to this gentle appearance. Lu Feng didn't look like her.

But inexplicably, An Zhe felt that her facial features bore some similarities to Lily's. If all of the base's people grew from the Garden of Eden's embryos and all the embryos came from the Garden of Eden's women, then Lily may indeed be Madam Lu's daughter by blood.

From this viewpoint, Lily decisively leaving him after seeing Madam Lu and holding her hand was understandable—after all, she was the Madam's youngling rather than his. In this world, only his spore would never voluntarily leave him.

An Zhe looked at Madam Lu. He didn't know what measures Madam Lu would take regarding him.

He only heard Madam Lu ask, "Is he your friend? Did you come to this passageway to find him?"

Lily and An Zhe locked eyes. Her crafty gaze shifted, and she said to Madam Lu, "He doesn't want to go back. Can I invite him to be my guest?"

"We can invite An Zhe to dinner. What they have is very yucky," Lily said.

An Zhe understood that this little girl wanted to help him hide from the people searching below, but he didn't think that Madam Lu would agree to it. After all, his abrupt appearance here was too strange.

But to his surprise, Madam Lu said, "All right."

"Wow, Madam, you're so nice today," Lily said.

Madam Lu bowed her head and stroked Lily's hair. "I have always loved you very much."

Lily affectionately rubbed against her palm. "I like you too."

So this was how An Zhe was taken to the twenty-second floor of the Garden of Eden, where the atmosphere there was peaceful. Speakers in the corridors were playing soft music, and the snow-white walls were covered with pictures of things like flowers, butterflies, bees, clouds, or the Virgin Mary. Compared to the outside, this place seemed like another world.

In the spacious corridor and main hall, An Zhe encountered other women. They were all dressed in pure white long dresses, wore their jet-black or chestnut brown hair loose, and had tranquil expressions on their faces. Upon seeing Madam Lu, they amicably nodded toward her and gave their greetings.

In a small annex of the communal dining hall, An Zhe ate the twenty-second floor's dinner. It was sweetened milk, half of a roast chicken, and a bowl of vegetable and corn soup.

After eating, the Madam said, "You should send your friend away now."

Lily wheedled, "Let him stay a while longer."

The Madam indulged her request, saying, "Then let's go water the flowers together."

Thus, holding An Zhe by the hand, Lily passed through the snow-white main hall and came to a round room somewhere else. An Zhe saw at a glance the luxuriant red and green within the room. The center of it was built into a flower bed several square meters in size, inside of which deep red roses were profusely blooming.

"My lover used to bring back seeds from the wilderness for me," Madam Lu said to An Zhe. "Later, Lu Feng would do so as well. I remember you were together with him that day."

An Zhe nodded.

"He's very rarely willing to get close to others." Madam Lu picked up the silver watering can that was on the flower stand.

Right at that moment, something suddenly flashed in An Zhe's field of vision, and he unconsciously turned his head—it was the room's TV screen. Nobody pressed the remote; it had turned on automatically.

"News from the Emergency Response Department." The rate at which the announcer spoke was much faster than usual. At the same time, a photo of An Zhe appeared on the screen. "It is critical that this suspect be arrested. If there are any witnesses, please immediately provide information on his whereabouts."

An Zhe's body tensed up slightly. The one-hour-long peace earlier seemed to be just an illusion; to him, this world was still full of dangers at every turn. He looked at Madam Lu.

But he heard Madam Lu say softly, "Don't be afraid."

Madam Lu's actions were always outside An Zhe's expectations. At first, he thought the Madam was a staunch advocate of the base's rules, but now it looked like that wasn't the case.

"You…"

"I will not help you escape, but for the time being I won't hand you over either." Madam Lu smiled.

An Zhe asked her, "How come?"

"They always have many reasons to arrest a person." Madam Lu's gaze moved away from the screen. Bowing her head, she watered her rosebushes. A crystalline drop of water rolled down the edge of a crimson petal, then fell from the dark green leaves and into the soil. "For example, forty years ago, they arrested my mother."

An Zhe didn't know what she wished to say, but she seemed to strongly want to tell a story. He had met many people who all wanted to tell him stories, as though hidden inside every single person's heart were pasts worth looking back upon.

So he said nothing and only listened quietly. The roses' fragrance surrounded them, and Lily plucked one. She peeled the petals away from the sepals, held them in her palm, and then tossed them into the air. Just like a shower of rain, the drifting petals fell, landing on her hair and body. One petal landed on the tips of Madam Lu's hair.

"The 23,371 women of the four human bases passed the following manifesto with zero rejection votes: I'm willing to devote myself to the destiny of humanity, accepting genetic experiments and all forms of assisted reproduction, to strive for my entire lifetime for the continuation of the human race." In a very soft voice, Madam Lu repeated the Rose Manifesto that An Zhe had once heard from Lily's mouth, but compared to the little girl's crisp and lively voice, her tone seemed somber.

"Deleted from this manifesto was one phrase, a prerequisite," Madam Lu said. "Under the premise of having fundamental human rights, I accept genetic experiments and all forms of assisted reproduction. Furthermore, the ones who initiated the manifesto also reached an accord with the base to have women manage women."

Her finger touched the soft edges of the roses. "However, that was something from nearly seventy years ago. At that time, it seemed that there was still hope for everything. The fate of humankind was laid out before us. So long as we could last, things would improve… If I were one of the twenty-three thousand women from that time, I would have also agreed without the slightest hesitation. Everyone is making sacrifices, so I'm willing to contribute my utmost for humankind's interests."

"Back then, the technology for in vitro culturing of embryos had not yet matured, so children had to stay within the mother's body for at least seven months. The base hoped that, for the sake of increasing the population, the rest time of their wombs would not exceed fifteen days." Madam Lu tilted her head back to look at the steel-hued ceiling. "The duty of childbirth was excessively heavy. Their entire lifestyles were devastated, and their lives were also ebbing. They had hoped for the base to loosen the requirements, but nobody agreed."

"For the women who voluntarily enacted the Rose Manifesto and all the girls who were born since then, dedicating themselves to this manifesto was a matter of course—moreover, our need for people was too great. The Lighthouse and military thought so, most of the people of the Main City and Outer City thought so, and even the women managing the women thought so."

Her tone of voice contained a gentleness that seemed capable of eliciting emotional resonance. As An Zhe silently listened, he saw Lily also quietly sitting at the edge of the flower bed.

"To fight for the protection of fundamental human rights, they initiated a protest movement. That was forty years ago, and my mother was among those who initiated the protest movement—she seemed to also be one of the earliest initiators of the Rose Manifesto." Madam Lu smiled. "But all of the pictures and written materials were destroyed. At that time, I was too young, so I don't remember much. I can only recall that one night, the

soldiers of the United Front Center broke into our home. She locked me in my room, and then there was a gunshot… I saw blood flow from under the door into my room. And after that, I was sent to the Garden of Eden."

"They had finally discovered that having an iron grip on the control of reproductive resources themselves was the most effective method, so they deleted that phrase from the manifesto. When a new generation of girls was gathered, they grew up with the teachings of the Garden of Eden, so they learned their duty by heart from a young age and received no other education. This way, the base did not have to worry about the decline of the birth rate, and no girl would feel the pain of losing her human rights because of the ceaseless childbirths."

She looked at the surrounding walls, but it was like she was looking at the entire human base through the walls. "I feel pain because of this, but I also know that my pain is just a trivial portion. In this place, people die every single second. In this age, the only way for humans to survive is to turn themselves into an aggregated creature. People with different duties are this creature's different organs. The Lighthouse is the brain, the military is the claws and fangs, the people of the Outer City are the flesh and blood, the buildings and city walls are the skin, and the Garden of Eden is the womb."

An Zhe looked at her. Seeming to understand his gaze, she said, "I've never resented this place."

She leaned over and picked up Lily, who buried her head on her shoulder.

"I'm just often perplexed about one thing," she said as she gently stroked Lily's hair with her fingers. "We resist monsters and xenogenics along with the contamination of human genes by foreign genes for the sake of preserving the will that is specific to humans and avoid being ruled by animal natures… But to achieve this goal, all of our actions run counter to the norms of human nature. And the community we collectively form—all

of the things it does, such as obtaining resources, strengthening itself, and producing offspring—can only embody the nature of animals. In fact, humans are no different from the monsters of the outside world. It's just that because of the brain's flexibility, they give their various actions self-deluding meanings. Humans are just one kind of ordinary animal. They are born like all other lives, and they are also on the cusp of extinction just like all other lives."

Madam Lu's eyes had a dead look. "Humankind's culture and technology are both all but worthless."

Saying nothing more, she lifted her head to gaze for a long time at the ceiling. An Zhe saw that her palm was resting against a dark-colored knob—and then she gently twisted it.

The metal plates on the ceiling that guarded against radiation noisily opened. This was the Garden of Eden's top floor, so outside the glass was the boundless light from the skies. Nighttime was when the solar winds temporarily ceased, so the silent twilight and the Milky Way poured in together.

An Zhe murmured, "There will be a day when it gets better."

Perhaps there truly would come a day when the Arbiter did not need to kill their fellow citizens, soldiers did not need to sacrifice themselves in the wilderness, and the girls of the Garden of Eden regained their freedom.

"No, there won't," Madam Lu said. "The time when this world is going to be utterly ruined is almost upon us."

"Lily," she said, turning to the little girl in her arms, "do you wish to fly?"

As An Zhe looked at her gentle profile and heard this sentence, a chill shot up his spine.

He heard Lily ask in a crisp voice as she hugged Madam Lu's neck, "Can I? Just like Si Nan?"

"Yes, you can."

Right at that moment, An Zhe finally understood Si Nan's purpose in having Lily return to the Garden of Eden.

It was the polar opposite of their earlier conjectures.

To return to the Garden of Eden was by no means because the place was safe.

Lily lifted her head from Madam Lu's shoulder and looked at An Zhe with those jet-black eyes. In her eyes, there had always been a peculiar cloudy-looking luster that reminded An Zhe of the creatures within the Abyss. In fact, every single woman and girl on the twenty-second floor had this sort of innocent demeanor. If a Judge were here, perhaps he would conclude that they were not real humans. If a person stayed within the Garden of Eden from birth and could not leave for the duration of their life, this person would definitely be different from the humans outside.

An Zhe felt a sudden slight pain in his head, for that wave occurred in his mind again, but it was far from the immensity and terror he felt in the late night. It was much more specific and much closer, as if the source was right at his side.

As he was watching Madam Lu, the lighting changed, and he saw within the Madam's eyes a hint of an illusory rainbow. "You…"

An Zhe took a few steps back. Behind him was the red alarm bell each room was equipped with. "You don't want to be human anymore?"

Madam Lu looked at him blankly, and a single tear rolled down from the rims of her eyes.

"There is no longer any hope for humankind," she said.

An Zhe said, "When Lu Feng returns…"

Before he finished speaking, Madam Lu suddenly began to laugh. At the same time, tears continually fell from her eyes, and her entire body was trembling like a leaf in the autumn wind. She covered her mouth firmly with her right hand, only letting out broken laughter.

"Humankind… has brought too much pain to my children and me." An Zhe finally heard her speak. Perhaps she was feeling tender affection for Lu Feng, but in the following moment, Madam Lu's voice turned frighteningly hoarse.

"Lu Feng… He is more steadfast than me. He is just like this base, able to sacrifice everything for the interests of humankind, but he will never be able to get what he wants." The Madam reached out and crushed a bright red rose. The thorn pricked her hand, but the pain made her voice calmer. "All of the things he wishes to protect will be destroyed. His beliefs are like castles in the air, and he will die a miserable death. Being unable to personally see the day when he goes mad and being unable to see the day when this base meets is doom are my only regrets."

The despondent and sorrowful emotions concealed within this voice made An Zhe open his eyes wide. With no idea what had happened, he looked at her in disbelief.

The rose petals slipped out of Madam Lu's hand, and her voice became softer. "What I wish to do is leave this place. For what purpose did you come to the human base and come to his side, little xenogenic?"

An Zhe looked at her, unable to say anything.

But it seemed that Madam Lu did not necessarily wish to hear his response. Her neck lengthened, and her entire body changed, stretching out and bending into a strange arc, then swelling and expanding—

Brown and jet-black lines appeared upon her. Her body became an oval pupa, her arms became the slender limbs of an arthropod, and two pairs of transparent wings tore through the pure white dress as they emerged from her back. Within a scant minute, she had become a monster that was half-human and half-bee.

That strange wave became even more fierce, but it simply enveloped Lily. Within this wave, Lily's body was undergoing the same changes.

"It's almost time. Humans' genes are too weak, so they are unable to perceive the changes currently happening in the world, and they are also incapable of enduring mutation and selection. But other organisms are not necessarily strong either," she murmured. "We will all die. I don't hate humans. I have worked for the base for thirty-five years, alleviating much pain for women and increasing the number of newborns born in the base each year."

She smiled. "But in the face of this calamity, all work was futile. It only proves the insignificance and powerlessness of humankind. I merely wish to experience those things I've never received before in this final peaceful age."

Her forewings shimmered beneath the moonlight. The queen bee's body was huge, slim, and beautiful.

Lily's transformation completed before hers did. She had already turned into a smaller bee and was darting around Madam Lu. The way she flew was so skillful that it seemed innate. From this bee, An Zhe could not find the slightest similarity to humankind.

As An Zhe looked at Madam Lu, he saw her frown slightly and close her eyes.

There was a somewhat pained expression on her tranquil face, but then her head underwent indescribable changes. Iridescent compound eyes bulged out, antennae burst forth, and the human bones twisted and transformed into hard, honey-colored chitin. This creature's size and beauty far surpassed all the other insect-class monsters An Zhe had seen before. Within this hexagonal beehive, she was like a queen bee.

A rustling started up, which was the sound of wings vibrating. Like flowing white gauze, the transparent insect wings shook a few times, then began to vibrate. Her body took flight, slowly rising toward the dome before abruptly accelerating once she had almost reached it!

With a dramatic shuddering noise, spiderwebbing cracks appeared in the solid glass dome. An Zhe felt that the dome's materials ought to be very strong, but with the second and third impacts, there was a bang, and countless tiny fragments of glass went flying. They landed on the ground and in the rose petals, seeming just like dewdrops.

The alarm was triggered. The entire room lit up with red, and the sound of the alarm was deafening. Numerous footsteps could be heard as staff members in white shirts broke in, but upon witnessing the scene before them, they were all stunned.

A huge hole had been created from the impacts. The bee Lily had transformed into flew out, soaring upward, and her figure swiftly disappeared in the boundless night.

The queen bee was somewhat slower. As she stood atop the dome, her head rotated, and she looked downward. Perhaps she still harbored fondness for this place. Then she slowly turned around, her wings twitching as though she had decided to fly upward.

But right in the following moment, the vibration of her wings stopped, and there was a deathly silence. The stilled wings were like an ominous rest in a piece of music. Bathed in the moonlight, the massive queen bee unexpectedly made a gradual turn, and a pair of golden compound eyes looked straight down, at An Zhe below—along with the entire Garden of Eden.

The queen bee's right forelimb poked in, the tip of its claw suffused with a cold and sharp silver light. This claw tip gradually increased in size, and a whole pair of forelimbs entered, followed by the massive head.

A feeling of strangeness suddenly arose in An Zhe's heart. This movement was too strange. Madam Lu, who had decided to leave this place and obtain freedom, would not come back again unless the one in control of this queen bee was no longer Madam Lu. Unless the monster's instinctual consciousness predictably and easily overcame the human mind.

When facing the humans of the Garden of Eden, what would a perfect xenogenic do?

All of this happened in just a few short seconds. As An Zhe looked at the staff members who were rooted in place, he said in a hoarse voice, "Hurry and go."

But in the very next second after he finished speaking, the queen bee lifted her head. A wave unparalleled in strength and difficult to describe, with the queen bee as the center, came rolling toward all of the people present!

A violent pain shot through An Zhe's head, and some blurry images unfolded before his eyes.

Prior to An Ze's death, when An Zhe absorbed all the blood and tissues from his body, An Ze's past memories had appeared in his mind like a series of pictures.

In the Outer City, on the day the insect swarms arrived, a bug had bitten his finger. When he dreamed that night, he had also seen what the insect had seen while flying in the wilderness.

Right now, facing the fragments of chaotic memories gushing forth before his eyes, An Zhe realized what was happening.

The queen bee was performing contactless infection.

30

“EVERY GUN WAS POINTED AT HIM.”

"WE ARE the ones most closely linked to the fate of humankind."

When Madam Lu was still but a little girl, her mother had told her this. At that time, her mother's lower abdomen was slightly swollen, for a new life was gestating within it.

"We are the ones most closely linked to the fate of humankind."

After she grew up, she told this to other girls as well. Back then, she was simultaneously bearing the responsibility for producing successive generations for the base while devoting herself to the research of embryo development technology. This research was extremely valuable, so she was the only fertile woman who could freely come and go from the Garden of Eden and the Lighthouse. One day, in a corridor of the Twin Towers, she met a handsome green-eyed officer.

And after that, she had a child. The birth of this child had nothing to do with her duty.

Because of both parties' work, she could not often meet her child's father, only converse through the communicators on occasion.

"Sometimes, I'll think… that I betrayed the Rose Manifesto," she said.

"Why do you think so?" At the other end of the communicator was a steady voice. "Aren't you growing a life right now?"

"To have children with their lover was a right women possessed only before the manifesto came into existence." She gently draped her fingers

over her lower abdomen. “Having the freedom to control my uterus without violating regulations or causing losses to the base's resources makes me… very happy, although this way of thinking is very dangerous."

The memories were patchy, with only a few key points.

"He's going to the military," Madam Lu said. "I previously suggested that he go to the United Front Center, but now the assignments have been made. Once you come back to the base, you'll meet him."

"Does he resemble me?"

"A little. The resemblance isn't very strong, and his character isn't like yours either. The base does not allow anyone to know their blood relationships, but as soon as you see him, you'll be able to know who he is."

"I really look forward to seeing him."

"You will see him," Madam Lu said. "Stay safe out in the wilderness."

"I will," that person said. "This time, we've retrieved very important scientific research materials, some of which are also related to your focus."

She smiled. "You've worked hard. My research has also been going very well recently."

"I miss you." The male voice on the other side suddenly lowered. "Last night, I dreamed of the day humankind completely survived the calamity. We were still alive, and our children were as well. We were eternally happy just like all other ordinary people."

Her voice was equally gentle. "Come back soon."

Everything was full of hope, but the limited memories of happiness from her life ended there.

Ten days later, she could no longer call her lover, nor could she get any news about him, so she had prepared for the worst-case scenario.

On the day she had decided to go to the United Front Center to inquire about her lover's whereabouts, she met her own child in the corridor.

She didn't see him often. As if in the blink of an eye, the child who would sneak up from the sixth floor to the twenty-second floor to see her grew into a capable adult, a handsome young officer.

Although her heart was full of anxiety, being able to see him nevertheless made her feel somewhat comforted. "You're here too."

Lu Feng said in a low voice, "Mother."

At that moment, she saw the ornamentation on his black uniform and the silver badge on his chest.

"Didn't the base assign you to the United Front Center?" she asked, slightly puzzled.

"I'm at the Trial Court," he said.

"Why did you go to that place?" she asked, looking at him anxiously. If not compelled to, very few people were willing to join the Trial Court.

"I volunteered." The young officer's cold green eyes seemed to contain complicated emotions, but in the end they returned to the calm of rationality. "At the Trial Court, I can be of greater use than at the United Front Center."

She wished to say something, but finally she shook her head in resignation. Everyone knew how the Trial Court was an insane place where everyone inevitably came to a terrible end.

But when it was time for them to part, Lu Feng called out to her from behind. "Mother."

Madam Lu turned around and looked at him. Lu Feng gazed at her, his voice seeming slightly hoarse as he asked, "What are you going there for?"

"Nothing." With no intention of letting her child know such things, she only smiled. "Take care of yourself."

And so she went and opened the office door of the United Front Center's Information Management Office.

"This is the Information Management Service. What do you wish to inquire about?"

"Commanding officer of the First Combat Order, Lieutenant General Gao Tang. Is he still in the wilderness?" she asked.

From the other side came the sounds of a few keystrokes.

"My apologies," the staff member said. "The Lieutenant General has already been confirmed to have died."

Her fingers were ice-cold, but she was still able to maintain her composure. To give one's life for the base was every soldier's fate.

"In… the wilderness?"

"At the entrance to the city," the staff member said. "The Trial Court's records show that Lieutenant General Gao Tang was judged to have been infected."

Her vision blurred, and she was almost unable to stay standing.

"Madam?" the staff member called out to her.

"The Trial Court…" she repeated in a murmur. "Are their judgments accurate?"

"They're generally accurate. The accuracy of every generation of Trial Court trainees can be controlled at eighty percent. The average accuracy of the trainees who officially joined the Trial Court this year is ninety percent… Madam, do you require assistance? Madam?"

As she dazedly stood there, Lu Feng's hoarse call of "Mother" from that time they were in the corridor suddenly echoed in her ears. Her body trembled.

Perhaps frightened by the Madam’s inaction, the staff member added, “Your authority level is high enough to view a detailed report. If you need to, I can request to view the exact data and ID number of the Judge in charge at the time… Madam?”

“No.” Her eyes widened as if she had seen something horrifying in midair. “Don’t look it up… don’t look it up.”

The memories were like a blank tide, their features blurry. Not only had she lost her lover, but from that day on, she had also gradually drifted apart

from Lu Feng. She had come close to losing him as well.

In fact, she was losing her children every single day.

On the day the Outer City was bombed, while listening to the distant rumble, Lily squirmed into her embrace.

"Why did they blow up their own city?"

"So humankind can be more safe."

"But the people there are also the Garden of Eden's children," Lily said. "If children aren't important, why must we be shut up in here?"

"They have their own reasons. For more lofty goals, they have to make some choices," she said softly as she held Lily. "The Main City and Outer City are both our children. Sometimes the child will be selfish and sometimes hurt his mother and his fellow citizens. Only when we understand them will we not feel pain."

As she spoke, the blood seeping under the door from her childhood, the Trial Court badge on Lu Feng's chest, and the mushroom cloud rising in the distance all overlapped in front of her eyes.

Lily asked the same question. "So do you understand now?"

She did not answer the question. Pressing her own forehead against Lily's forehead, she closed her eyes. "I truly hope you all will never again experience this kind of pain."

As though a sorrowful piece of music had come to a close, An Zhe slowly opened his eyes.

He found himself lying next to the rose bed. Looking upward, he saw the deep red and dark green flowers and leaves, glass shards twinkling amongst them. A dark shadow swept through his field of vision, so he looked further up. The hole in the dome that originally could only accommodate the queen bee had gotten bigger, now taking up three-quarters of the dome. Its broken edges were glimmering with light, and a bee as long as a human arm was flying out through it.

The wave had disappeared, and there was no trace of the queen bee above the dome, but the glass bore signs of having been broken. In the night sky outside, gunfire exploded like fireworks. The humans' armed forces had begun fighting, although whether they had killed the queen bee or not was unknown. But it was very difficult to hit a bee in the vast expanse of the night. An Zhe saw the small bee flying higher and higher before it disappeared beneath the silver light of the moon.

Then there were several more dark shadows. With the buzzing of vibrating wings, five, then ten, then countless bees came flooding over from all directions. Some of the bees still had scraps of white fabric on them. An Zhe looked at where they came from and saw that the twenty-second floor was completely deserted, with not a person in sight. Everyone had turned into bees and were flying outward.

Bees—

Another flickering image appeared in An Zhe's mind.

He was a bee, a normal bee who did not eat people and only gathered from flowers.

It was a summer day, the reproduction season for bees, but it had flown into a human city by mistake. This city was impenetrable, with people's doors and windows tightly shut. The bee simply wanted to find pollen it could eat, but from start to finish, it was unable to do so.

At last, the bee saw it—behind some glass, there was a bright red rose in full bloom.

A woman was taking care of this flower. Standing next to the windowsill, she looked at the rose with a smile. After a long time, she then listlessly gazed at the sky outside, seemingly wishing very much to push the window open and touch the sky.

So this bee waited a very long time, until the woman left and came back, until she looked outside and dazedly shed a single tear.

Seeming as though she had finally made some sort of decision, she pushed the window open and the wind outside—the unrestrained wind—poured in. She closed her eyes as though she could take flight with the wind.

The bee had been hungry for a very long time. After it landed on the rose's stamen, pollen covered its fuzzy hind legs, and it inserted its slender proboscis into the center of the flower.

But it was very quickly discovered.

The woman reached out a hand toward it, her fingers trembling slightly, and her eyes trembling as well. There was even some slight madness, as if this was the first time she had ever seen such a life. She moved very slowly, by no means seeming as though she wanted to brush the bee away, but the bee's instinct preordained what would happen next.

When her fingers were but a few millimeters away from touching it, the bee unconsciously stung her.

The bee died, and when its body left the woman's finger, a portion of its viscera were pulled out and left hanging at the end of the stinger. A bee could only use its stinger once in its life.

But it also seemed to have not died, for while its body fell into the rose, its consciousness seemed to become a portion of this woman's consciousness. Just like that, it went dormant for a long time, and nobody knew of its existence. Even the woman herself thought that she had merely been stung and not infected.

Until the bee's portion of her consciousness was gradually activated by the strange waves coming from afar.

The bee's memories were very basic. After removing this experience, it could even be described as unremarkable. When An Zhe opened his eyes once again, those things gradually faded from his mind, and the roses in front of his eyes were still as vibrant as before. Who had given the flower from back then to Madam Lu?

Only two people would give her flower seeds, her erstwhile lover and Lu Feng. Their reason for sending her flowers was no more than to make her a little happier.

So in the season when the roses were blooming, the beautiful sight moved her heart, and she then wanted to bathe in the sunshine and air outside. That was how she met the bee that had come in pursuit of flowers.

The outside wind poured in. An Zhe's head gradually cleared, and he got up from the ground. The surroundings were deserted. Shredded clothes, communicators, and the various things that people always carried around lay fallen all over the ground. He could imagine that when he was affected by the strong wave and fell into the sights within the Madam's and the bee's memories, all the people present had also been infected by the wave. The hundreds of people had turned into hundreds of bees, all flying through the hole at the top of the dome into the sky.

But he was an exception, still maintaining a human body. Just like that time he was bitten by an insect, he had not mutated.

Right at that moment, a sense of danger arose in An Zhe's heart. He lifted his head and looked at the top of the dome. Three small military helicopters were hovering there, where they had just now opened fire on the bee swarm. An Zhe squinted in that direction, but he discovered that at this very moment, a black gun muzzle was extended out from a helicopter window and pointing directly at him.

At the same time, there were disorderly footsteps from outside the door, alarms going off in the background, and emergency lights and red alarm lights flashing madly. The floor trembled, and the heavily armed soldiers of the Emergency Response Department flooded in, securely surrounding An Zhe. Every one of them bore heavy weaponry, and every gun was pointed at him.

Underground City Base, core area.

"Thank you for providing assistance." The white officer removed his service cap. "We assumed the Northern Base would not come."

The most chaotic time had ended.

The sounds of gunfire and explosions were dying away, only echoing in the distance, and the ground was covered with shattered glass and instruments.

An officer was saying rapidly, "The prerequisite for contactless infection is being in close proximity with monsters! Clean up the bodies first!"

Then there was a gunshot, and the officer fell. The one who opened fire was an officer of the Underground City Base.

"This is our Judge," the white officer next to Lu Feng said. "After the fall of the Virginia Base, we followed your example and set up a Trial Court. Over the years, the Trial Court has been like the base's guardian angel."

Under the protection of soldiers, a team of engineers passed through the half-collapsed steel archway and went inside the magnetic pole to perform emergency repairs.

As Lu Feng looked in that direction, he asked, "How did this invasion happen?"

"Brute force attack. They came from the giant rainforest three hundred kilometers away, their sole purpose to obtain human genes and occupy the underground base—you know, the Underground City is both warm and safe, making it the most suitable place for creatures to survive."

"What about their purpose in destroying the magnetic pole?"

"Humans' genes, thinking ability, and knowledge are constantly leaking. We can only make the guess that they already know a little. By destroying the magnetic pole, humankind will fall into confusion, which is beneficial to their assault."

"They are too numerous and powerful. Our armaments are insufficient and our research and development capability is on the decline, so we were unable to perform suppressive fire. We had no choice but to seek help from you." The officer rubbed his gun's shoulder stock. "Why does the Northern Base still have such plentiful ammunition and reserves of thermonuclear weapons? Do you have some sort of technological breakthrough?"

"For now, no." Lu Feng took off his bloodstained gloves, voice flat as he answered the officer's question. "The Northern Base has sufficient numbers of troops. When fighting on the frontlines, we can use the numeric advantage to reduce the depletion of armaments."

"Conversely, the reason for our base's huge consumption of armaments is precisely because of our shortage of troops." The white officer frowned as he thought hard.

"I got it… It's because of that heavily criticized Rose incident." Before Lu Feng could reply, the officer had an epiphany, but the expression in his eyes was very complicated. "The Northern Base seems to always make these kinds of choices."

"I really admire the willfulness you lot have," he finally stated.

The Northern Base.

When An Zhe was escorted away from the twenty-second floor, he passed the main hall. One hour ago, this was a place with soothing music

and a gentle atmosphere, but now it was a mess. Nobody was walking around, and a tea table was toppled over in one corner. Glass cups lay on their sides, and milk was spilled everywhere, soaking a white dress that lay flat on the ground. On this white dress were some shining honey-colored things resembling the fluff on a bee's limbs.

"How many people were infected?" the commanding officer of the Emergency Response Department shouted into his communicator.

"The twenty-second, twenty-first, and twentieth floors!" A grating voice came from the communicator. "All the women in the Garden of Eden who meet the Rose Manifesto's standards, all the staff members, and the vast majority of the embryos in the culturing devices on the twentieth floor. There are some on the other floors as well, and they are currently being culled!"

The commanding officer's fingers tensed up, nearly crushing the communicator.

The second-in-command asked, "What do we do now?"

"Clean the place up! Have you gone soft in the head?" The furious commanding officer whirled around and the second-in-command shivered, but the one whom he turned to was not the second-in-command, but An Zhe.

Beneath the pale lamplight, his visage was as cold as a stone statue.

"What happened on the twenty-second floor?" His voice was like a thunderclap in An Zhe's ear, making his head ache. The soldiers escorting him pushed him forward, and he felt that the bones of his shoulders were on the verge of being crushed.

The pain made An Zhe tremble slightly. He lowered his eyelashes.

"Madam Lu mutated," he said.

"At that time, where were you?"

"… In front of her."

"Why would she mutate?" he roared. "The twentieth and higher floors of the Garden of Eden are watertight, so how could the women here mutate?"

"Many years ago… she was stung once by a bee," An Zhe replied truthfully, and the officer in front of him became so frighteningly violent that he unconsciously stepped backward and was pushed further forward by the soldiers escorting him.

"If she could mutate, she would have done so long ago!" The commanding officer yanked out the pistol at his waist.

"Senior Colonel, calm down a little. The current situation—" the second-in-command said shakily.

The ice-cold muzzle of a gun was jammed against An Zhe's temple.

"You're going to speak for him?" Veins bulged out on the senior colonel's neck. "I saw him during the transfer! He's someone from the Lighthouse, not a worker of the twenty-second floor—didn't the Lighthouse have a bee sample before? I've said ages ago that those science lunatics were raising xenogenics in the Twin Towers and accidents will happen sooner or later! Just like that old Fusion Faction, they want the base to die!"

The second-in-command asked, "Do you want to contact the Trial Court?"

"There's no need for the Trial Court." The senior colonel pressed down on the trigger, his voice cold. "He's linked to the infection."

An Zhe gently closed his eyes.

He knew the meaning that the recent event held for the humans. The disappearance of the mothers and children meant that the human base had completely lost its future. Under this sort of circumstance, no matter what the senior colonel did, he would not be surprised.

Right at that moment!

"Senior Colonel!" A familiar voice rang out from the end of the main hall.

It was the doctor.

An Zhe looked in that direction.

"He is from the Garden of Eden and currently assisting the Lighthouse with a study," the doctor said. "Please hand him over to me."

"Everyone was infected, and only he lives. Plus, his arrest was ordered tonight because of a sample." The senior colonel's voice was deep. "Does the Lighthouse intend to shield him? Exactly what research have you people been doing? Why is infection possible without contact?"

"Regardless of whether this matter has anything to do with the Lighthouse or not, you must hand him over to me," the doctor said. "At least I know that if he is killed, all will be lost."

The senior colonel let out a sardonic laugh. "And then you will continue your dangerous experiments?"

"What happened tonight has absolutely nothing to do with the Lighthouse's experiments," the doctor said in a calm voice. "On the contrary, we will investigate why things are this way."

"Since more than a hundred years ago, you people have said you can figure out the cause of infection, but right now you're still ignorant, unable to obtain even clues," the senior colonel said. "How can the Lighthouse guarantee that it won't be more dangerous to keep him around?"

"I have no way to guarantee it"—the doctor looked directly at the senior colonel—"but I know that the base's situation will not be worse than it is now."

After a brief silence, the senior colonel's gun-wielding hand trembled. The doctor’s words seemed to make him lose all strength at that moment.

He said slowly, "After an hour, there must be some progress."

The doctor said, "All right."

With a bang, the interrogation room door came slamming down, and the escorting soldiers stood guard outside.

Through a layer of glass, An Zhe and the doctor looked at each other. The soldiers' actions were rough, practically hurling him in, and his back and shoulder blades were still throbbing with pain.

But the doctor did not exchange greetings with him. There was no time, and perhaps he wasn't in the mood.

His first question was identical to the senior colonel's. "Exactly what happened tonight?"

An Zhe told him the truth. Unlike the senior colonel, after a brief period of contemplation, the doctor believed him.

"What you're saying is that there had always been xenogenic genes incubating in her body, and they expressed themselves only now?"

An Zhe nodded.

"She killed the base's women and offspring. Was it because she hated the base that she made this choice? Are you saying that while she was lucid, she initiated contactless infection within a certain range?"

"That's not it." An Zhe shook his head. "Right when she had just turned into a bee, she only wanted to leave this place, but the bee later returned."

"Do you believe her consciousness had already been taken over at that time?"

"Yes."

The doctor suddenly laughed, but the sound of it was very raspy. His brows were furrowed and the corners of his eyes were downturned. It was a smiling expression that looked even more ugly than crying. "She could not be spared either."

An Zhe silently looked at him.

"Don't look at me with that sort of expression." The doctor took a deep breath. "It's like you don't know anything, yet also like you know everything."

An Zhe said, "I don't know anything."

"Si Nan… Si Nan being able to maintain occasional lucidity is already a one-in-ten-thousand possibility," the doctor said.

"Do you know of the Fusion Faction?" the doctor asked.

An Zhe shook his head.

"A hundred years ago, the base's scientific research strength was tremendous. Many scientists believed that other organisms could obtain larger bodies and greater strength via mutation, and then through mutual infection and variation obtain the ability to adapt to the environment. Humans could as well." the doctor said.

"They first observed the changes radiation made to the human body, but the more complex an organism's genes are, the lower the probability of favorable mutation. When human beings are exposed to cosmic radiation, they can only get multiple cancers all over their bodies or other genetic disorders."

"Later, they believed that genetic infection was a means by which humans could evolve, so as a result they were known as the 'Fusion Faction.' They performed many crazy experiments, infecting monsters with various monsters and infecting humans with monsters. They created countless xenogenics with the aim of observing how human genes change and how to preserve human will in their memories. They discovered the fragility of human will and that human intelligence is very easily acquired by xenogenics, but there were indeed individuals who could maintain lucidity and control their post-mutation bodies with human thinking—although it was for limited periods, sometimes long and sometimes short."

An Zhe silently listened, but he saw the corners of the doctor's lips curl up in a self-mocking smile. "This was a piece of good news. They applied for more samples and finally eliminated all influencing factors, but they reached a certain conclusion. There is no external method whatsoever that can help a person maintain his will, and whether or not a person can remain lucid after being infected does not depend on the tenacity of his will. When a person is infected, there is a one-in-ten-thousand chance he'll retain his consciousness, and the other 9,999 will forfeit their will. This is just a question of probability. Everything is random, everything is irregular, everything is uncontrollable. Randomness is the most fearsome thing for science. The day this conclusion was reached, at least three of the Fusion Faction's scientists committed suicide."

"But there were also some people who did not lose heart and continued their research. They believed that the reason why this matter presented random results was because we had not yet found the decisive factor or that the decisive factor was beyond the scope of what could be understood with human technology."

"… And then?" An Zhe asked.

"Then there was no more Fusion Faction. All samples were killed, and all research was urgently stopped." The doctor's voice fell lightly. "In that year, a humanoid leech xenogenic contaminated the water source supplying the entire Outer City, and the entire city was exposed. The ten days over which the Trial Court was set up and blood flowed like water… That xenogenic was a Fusion Faction experimental subject that had acquired human intelligence."

An Zhe thought hard, digesting the implication of the doctor's words.

But then he heard the doctor abruptly say, "I've said enough to him. Have you made your judgment?"

An Zhe was stunned. Lifting his head, he saw a door on one side of the room open and Seraing and another Judge walk through it to stand behind

the doctor.

He suddenly looked at the side of the interrogation room he was in. It was a smooth mirror.

"It's a one-way mirror," the doctor said. "Seraing had been watching you the whole time."

"According to the Trial rules," Seraing said, looking at An Zhe, "I still believe he is human."

"I thought as much." The doctor seemed to finally let out a sigh of relief. "Even Lu Feng could comfortably place him by his own side."

"Lu Feng…" With those words, the doctor's eyes flew wide open. "If Madam Lu had been infected long ago and it was gradually stimulated over recent days, and she could even infect Si Nan without completely losing her sanity, why did Lu Feng not see it?"

"My apologies." Seraing's gentle eyelashes lowered. "The Trial Court has never been able to judge whether or not the women of the Garden of Eden have been infected."

The doctor was taken aback. "Why is that?"

"The environment in which they grow up is too different from that of ordinary humans. According to the Trial rules, every single woman does not meet the standards."

The doctor was stunned.

Five seconds later, he couldn't help laughing out loud. He bent double, body trembling, and his hands clutched the chair's armrests in a death grip.

It was only once a full three minutes passed that he finished laughing, after which his expression changed to one of loss. The color in his cheeks receded, leaving behind only a wan complexion.

"Do you still recall the source of the calamity that happened not long ago in the Outer City?" he suddenly asked.

"I do," Seraing said. "Insect-class creatures had reached their breeding season."

"Like that, why the Madam infected so many people can be explained," the doctor said. "She wished to leave the Garden of Eden, where the only goal was human reproduction. She wanted to obtain freedom, even if she had to abandon her human form and consciousness for that purpose. However… The moment she completely freed herself from her human body was also when she was controlled by the queen bee's biological instinct… It's currently the breeding season for arthropods. What she was doing when she was human was something she still had to do after turning into the queen bee. She…"

The doctor continued speaking, his broken words making it difficult to form sentences. In the end, he closed his eyes bitterly. "She could never get free."

After a long silence, his voice was frighteningly hoarse. "It's inescapable."

An Zhe opened his eyes slightly wider, for he realized what the doctor was saying.

The instinct of a creature was to live, and the instinct of a species was to reproduce.

No person could escape it. Nobody could escape it, and the Madam had already fallen into it for eternity.

Perhaps, perhaps at that moment only, that fleeting moment—the moment she was about to turn into a bee but had not yet done so—she briefly obtained what she wanted.

Then the eternal and ignorant black curtain abruptly fell before her eyes.

"The Rose Manifesto was the inevitable choice for the base's long-term development, but it does indeed violate the standards of humanity. The Trial Court, the mercenaries, the emergency response system… Many systems were violated. If I was not seeing things from the base's point of view, I would support the Madam's resistance." His voice was extremely low. "But

did her resistance have any meaning? She even… took away all of our embryos."

"Nobody had done anything wrong, but the ending is still the same." He looked at the blank walls, the look in his eyes approaching that of a breakdown. Seemingly on the verge of breaking, he could barely maintain his clearheadedness by mumbling to himself, "This… this fucking age."

To humans, this era of the geomagnetic field's disappearance was not a catastrophe, but rather a trampling upon.

It first made humans aware of their own bodies' fragility, then made them grasp the meaninglessness of the technology they were so proud of, then denied the legitimacy of the entire base's methods of operation, and finally proved that the will that humans alone had was also all but worthless.

But putting it this way was also not quite right.

Because this world did not care about the existence of humans at all.

An Zhe placed his hand flat against the interrogation room's glass. He strove to get closer to the doctor, wishing to comfort him.

"All right." He saw the doctor take several deep breaths, forcing himself to recover a certain degree of calm. "Now it's time for you to answer two questions."

"First, since Seraing believes that you're human, why were you not infected by Madam Lu? Second, why did you enter Laboratory D1344 and take away the inert sample?"

An Zhe dropped his eyes and said nothing.

"You must tell me," the doctor said. "If I cannot get results, you still will only be able to land in the senior colonel's hands."

An Zhe silently shook his head.

"You haven't seen the military's interrogation methods." The doctor got up from his chair, stood in front of the glass wall, and met his gaze. "If you also don't know why you weren't infected, we'll just wait for Lu Feng to

come back, restore power, and go to the Lighthouse to perform a full-body examination, but you must tell me where the D1344 sample is."

An Zhe still said nothing. In the end, the doctor said, "Is there something you cannot tell Seraing and me?"

An Zhe nodded.

"Why not? You're a good kid." The look in the doctor's eyes was complicated as he once again repeated, "That sample is of great importance. Exactly where is it?"

31

"HE HOPED THAT THE COLONEL WOULD ALWAYS BE THE COLONEL."

AN ZHE HAD NOT SLEPT for twenty hours. If he counted from the incident with the Madam, about five or six hours had passed, and it was now midnight.

He had revealed nothing to the doctor. Once the time limit was up, the senior colonel lost all of his patience and ordered a forced confession.

The interrogation room was very well equipped. Humankind's torture method was very civilized, for it would not cause blood and flesh to fly. It was a kind of electrocution.

The feeling of the electric current traveling through his body was like thousands of venomous ants all gnawing at the nerves throughout his body at the same time.

Pain.

Pain that he had never experienced before.

An Zhe closed his eyes, gasping for breath and trembling all over. Fine beads of cold sweat formed on his forehead, and every inch of his skin was twitching.

When his spore was in the laboratory, had it experienced this kind of treatment? Perhaps it had.

Amidst the immeasurable pain, he lost virtually all of his lucidity. His mind was a chaotic mess; it was as though he had thought a lot, yet he didn't

know exactly what he had thought about. He just vaguely felt that it was something very important.

He also did not know exactly how much time had passed. This painful torment stretched the seconds out, making each one feel like a lifetime.

Amidst his grogginess, he suddenly heard a sound from the corridor outside!

"Doctor—the magnetic field frequency has risen again!"

Like a thunderclap, this cry made him give a start, and he abruptly came around. Likewise, the atmosphere in the interrogation room changed in an instant.

An Zhe's heart thumped a few times. The magnetic field frequency has risen again, the magnetic field frequency has risen again—

This meant that the Underground City Base had been saved. It also meant that Lu Feng was coming back, assuming he was still alive.

He heard the doctor's eager voice. "It's risen again? Is it a large extent? Can it return to the normal frequency?"

"I don't know," an unknown person replied. "But the aurora has already appeared, and the frequency's fluctuation indicates that the Underground City Base is manually performing frequency adjustments. They are safe."

"Good heavens…" The doctor's voice trembled. "They… they really were able to be saved. What about communications? Have communications been restored? Quickly get in touch with the military and open the emergency channel right away. What happened over here was too big, we must tell Lu—"

"Doctor," Seraing spoke up all of a sudden, saying in a low voice, "I just received an emergency message from the military. We're prohibited from making any form of contact with the Colonel."

After a brief silence, the doctor asked, "How come?"

"I… do not know," Seraing said. "Perhaps it is because of Madam Lu and An Zhe."

In an instant, An Zhe suddenly recalled what he had been mulling over the entire time.

He was the murderer who had stolen the important sample.

Madam Lu was the xenogenic who had infected the entire Garden of Eden.

And both he and Madam Lu were people who had direct connections to Lu Feng.

He was still not yet clearheaded, but in that moment, with strength that sprang from an unknown source, he acquired an astonishing calmness. After coughing a few times, he said weakly, "… I'll talk."

The electric current disappeared, and his head became a little clearer. He was deeply regretting what he had said to the doctor just now about the Garden of Eden, Madam Lu, and the queen bee, but he believed that the doctor would definitely be able to understand what he meant.

But the effects of the electrocution were too severe. He could not speak at all, his head felt heavy, and his entire body was continuously spasming and retching. In the end, the doctor opened the interrogation room door and poured him a cup of sugar water.

An Zhe finally recovered a little.

"Everything I said before was untrue. I'm a xenogenic," he said. "There's a kind of wave that induces contactless infection, and xenogenics can feel it. Five days ago, I came into contact with Si Nan at the Lighthouse and was infected. I destroyed the inert sample because you people said… it was very important to humankind. Then, in order to avoid arrest, I went to the Garden of Eden, where Madam Lu was very friendly to me. Under the breeding season's influence, I infected the women there, using her as the center."

The doctor looked at him and asked with a frown, "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm a xenogenic who has already obtained human intelligence. I was infected five days ago." An Zhe's voice was very soft and certain. He knew that his lie was very shoddy, but with the doctor's intellect, he would definitely be able to understand.

The doctor was suddenly seized with terror, a slight tremor in his voice as he said, "You—"

All at once, snow-white hyphae fluttered in the air. The doctor's eyes flew wide open, but then the hyphae forcibly covered his mouth and nose. In the event of suffocation, people would reflexively open their mouths and breathe wildly, so the hyphae took advantage of the opportunity to feed themselves into the doctor's mouth.

After a fit of violent coughs, the doctor's gaze instantly went unfocused, and then he pitched forward and fell unconscious onto the ground.

Seraing yanked out his gun!

"When Lu Feng comes back, or when the people from the military ask, tell them… what I said." While looking at Seraing, An Zhe's tone of voice carried a hint of an entreaty. "Then, just as I lost my mind and was about to attack the doctor, you shot me and my body evaporated. In this world, I never existed."

The muzzle of Seraing's gun was pointed at him. "… Why would you do this? Exactly what are you?"

"I…" An Zhe slowly tightened his grip on the Trial Court badge in his hand.

He was a mushroom, but he could not say it. He could not be a mushroom.

However, he was about to leave. This was something he had decided upon from the very beginning. After he left, no matter how other people viewed him, it would no longer have any meaning.

He knew how important the human base was to Lu Feng. As for why he was able to enter it, it was because the Arbiter had chosen to believe in him

based on a strange intuition, and he knew how valuable this trust was.

If Lu Feng came back and knew the truth of everything, he would know the depth of his mother's hatred for and disappointment in the base's institutions as well as how she semi-voluntarily turned into a xenogenic and finally destroyed the entire Garden of Eden. And then, even the person he had always kept at his side and placed his trust in was a xenogenic who had always been harboring evil thoughts and designs against the sample—

What would happen to Lu Feng? Would he be able to accept it?

An Zhe did not know, but he did not wish to have Lu Feng face these kinds of things.

It was not necessarily because he was worried about how the base would look upon Lu Feng. He and Lu Feng could not be considered as having a deep friendship; in fact, he was bullied very badly by the man.

He just…

He just felt that Lu Feng was a very good human.

The Madam had said that Lu Feng would die a miserable death and that being unable to personally see the day Lu Feng went mad was her greatest regret. Then… Lu Feng being able to stay forever unwavering was his sole aspiration worth speaking of within this human base.

The Madam has already left, so there remained nobody to tell the tale. Just let what happened tonight to be an ordinary accidental infection event, An Zhe thought.

"I'm saying," he murmured, "that I'm already no longer human."

With a bang, Seraing's bullet fired toward An Zhe's right shoulder, but after the gunshot rang out, the bullet embedded itself into the wall opposite, while An Zhe himself swayed briefly. All of his clothes dropped to the ground, but the body inside them disappeared without a trace. There was only a white shape that abruptly appeared in front of Seraing before disappearing just as quickly, as if it were simply an illusion.

An Zhe dove into the vent in the corner behind him. Whatever Seraing thought, he was in no position to care. He entered the convoluted pipes at top speed, almost recklessly finding one room after another until he finally got out at a deserted office that had a window. Using his human form, he pushed the window open, and the aurora shone down on him. He braced his arms against the windowsill and leaped down. Swiftly turning into hyphae, he slid all the way down along the outer wall and landed on the ground.

The aurora had just appeared, and the power supply had not yet been fully restored, so there were no people outside nor any surveillance. He changed into human form and, clad in a robe made from hyphae, sprinted outward.

People could come chasing at any time; this was the most stressful journey of An Zhe's life. He crossed the entire Main City and returned to the Outer City. At the Outer City's abandoned supply depot, he picked up a backpack containing simple clothes, hardtack, and maps—maps were the most important thing. Holding the backpack in his arms, he traveled outward along the rail transit line. The journey was very long. He walked for a very long time in the night, but it didn't matter.

When the aurora was fading little by little and the eastern horizon lit up with a hint of red, An Zhe had reached the Outer City's gate.

The examination office, the Trial Court… The buildings at the city gate were identical to when he arrived, but because the Outer City had emptied out, everything was locked up. An Zhe turned and came to the base of the wall. He climbed up onto the roof of an armored vehicle, then reached out, his fingers turning into hyphae before he started climbing up the city wall—perhaps because of the solar wind over the past few days, a strange sight appeared at the top of the city wall: it was covered with an even layer of sand, the fine grains seemingly fused with the steel wall to form an amalgamation. When the hyphae got there, fine white sand fell down, but the inner layer was sand as well.

After a slow climb, An Zhe stood atop the wall. Right at that moment, something next to him quivered. An Zhe instantly looked over to discover that there were two black bees the size of humans next to the heavy machine guns at the top of the wall and a few more not far away. One could imagine that they had flown out from the Garden of Eden not long ago and were temporarily resting here.

That gray bee had been awoken by his movements, and its trembling wings indicated that it was about to fly off. An Zhe pursed his lips. In the span of a moment, he made a decision—

In the following moment, part of his body transformed into softer, more flexible, and more weightless hyphae. He threw himself forward and wrapped himself around the black bee, and his body sank into the bristles on the black bee's back.

Frightened, the black bee's wings started vibrating with a buzzing sound, and it swiftly flew toward the sky, catapulting into the distance.

An Zhe stayed securely on its back. The cool early morning wind blew into his face, and he narrowed his eyes as he looked back at the entire human base. The sun had risen, and the glorious daybreak poured its magnificent golden light down, enveloping the foggy city. Suddenly, he heard a thundering noise travel over from a distant place.

He opened his eyes slightly and saw a black dot gradually increase in size. It was the shape of a familiar fighter plane, the PL1109. Its jet-black body was plated with a golden shimmer amidst the dawn's sea of clouds, and on each side of it was a team of wingmen. Their flight speed gradually slowed, and the entire fleet slowly descended, appearing to be preparing to land.

Lu Feng had come back safely. Although going to the rescue of the Underground City Base was a nigh-impossible mission to complete, the Colonel seemed to have always been an invincible person.

Stimulated by the sound, the black bee flew even faster into the distance. The fierce winds lifted up An Zhe's sleeves, causing them to flap noisily.

As An Zhe looked over there, he didn't know why, but although the early morning wind made his eyes sting, he still smiled.

He recalled the scene when he first saw Lu Feng at the bottom of this city gate. That day, the humans' Arbiter had lifted his head to look at An Zhe from afar, and beneath the black hat brim was a pair of ice-cold green eyes.

The Madam's roses withered, but he hoped that the Colonel would always be the Colonel.

Goodbye.

32

“I... HATE YOU.”

"MODULE A1 IS NORMAL."

"Module D3 is normal."

"The engine…"

The whole plane gave a jerk.

"Unknown engine breakdown!"

"Initiate emergency landing procedure!"

"Commander, the emergency procedure failed to initiate!"

"Switch to manual mode!"

The entire plane shook wildly, and the roar of the engine was intermittent.

Hubbard gripped his seat's armrests and checked that his seat belt was fastened.

"A breakdown?" Lu Feng asked. "Wasn't it checked once prior to takeoff?"

Next to him, Hubbard frowned slightly. "Were we attacked by flying xenogenics during the flight?"

Another officer said, "No, we've been safe the entire time."

Hubbard narrowed his eyes. "Speaking of which, one of our wingmen crashed three hours ago."

The cabin trembled continually, and the plane went up and down. In the end, it finally maintained stability and taxied to the ground.

The cockpit door opened, revealing the pale faces of the deputy commander and navigator. The navigator knelt down next to the trash can and vomited.

"Good heavens…" the deputy commander said. "We were almost done for. There's definitely a problem with the engine. I've never seen this sort of breakdown before. This plane can't be used anymore. It must be completely overhauled."

However, although they were almost done for, they still landed safely.

The moment they got off the plane, Lu Feng lifted his head to look at this city that was bathed in the morning sunlight. In the Outer City area, a swarm of bees took flight, wings vibrating, and disappeared into the sky.

"Bees?" Hubbard asked.

But they had no time to continue their discussion.

A row of the United Front Center's officers stood neatly at the bottom of the boarding stairs.

"Welcome back." After saluting them, the leader had a serious expression on his face as he said, "On behalf of the base, I congratulate you."

Hubbard had no military rank and thus did not need to care about the military's ritualistic formalities. Without beating around the bush, he asked, "What's the matter with the base?"

The corners of that officer's mouth tightened. "Unspeakable disaster," he said.

Then he turned toward Lu Feng. "Colonel Lu Feng, please come with us."

Lu Feng looked around and, without saying anything, got into a car with them.

While looking toward the direction they left in, Hubbard's gaze was frozen in place. Next to him was a senior officer of the general staff. Right

at that moment, the officer said, "The relationship between the United Front Center and Colonel Lu is not very good."

"I heard that on the very first day he officially became a Judge, he killed one of the United Front Center's lieutenant generals," Hubbard said, arms crossed.

The officer said nothing. In this situation, staying silent was approximately the same as tacit agreement.

United Front Center.

"That's basically the situation," the admiral at the end of the long table said.

The base had a strict military hierarchy, but the Trial Court was an exception. It was initially just a joint organization formed by the Lighthouse and the military, with scientific research personnel heading it, so there were no predefined ranks that were too high up. Afterward, the Trial Court was stationed in the Outer City almost all year round. The Outer City's ranks were even more limited, with the directors of the City Defense Agency and City Affairs Office all being colonels. As a result, many years passed without anyone proposing to elevate the Arbiter's military rank.

But everyone knew that the Arbiter had the authority beyond all other ranks to bring others to trial, maneuver, and issue orders. His actual authority far surpassed what a colonel could have. Precisely because of this, the existence of this position seemed to make people be even more on guard and fearful, but the base was unable to part with it.

Lu Feng's voice was very soft, and no discernible fluctuations of emotion could be heard. "How many people does the base have left?"

"According to the preliminary census, there are 8700 survivors."

"At present, the United Front Center has dispatched a fleet to track the swarm's trajectory," the admiral said. "Colonel Lu, I must declare that the two immediate suspects in this calamity both have connections to you."

"I am deeply sorry," Lu Feng said. "But I personally am absolutely loyal to the base."

"The base believes in you," the admiral said. "You know what you ought to do."

"Yes." Lu Feng's voice was flat. "Unknown breakdowns have occurred with the PL1109 fleet, so there is no way of executing the flight mission. Requesting alteration."

"Request granted."

Dusk had fallen. An Zhe did not know where his black bee wanted to fly to, but he was almost dried out by the wind. Thus, when the black bee landed for a brief rest, he changed into hyphae form again and covered its entire head.

Unsurprisingly, the black bee fell unconscious.

This place, a flat desert, was very dry and unsuited for the survival of mushrooms. From the backpack, An Zhe took out human clothes and put them on, then ate a bit of hardtack and drank some water. With the black bee's body blocking the wind, he planned to sleep for a night first.

The roar of a plane came from the sky. An Zhe tilted his head back and watched it fly south. Over the course of this day, there were more than ten southbound planes. On the black bee's back, An Zhe thought for a good while before finally coming up with a conjecture.

The black bee was also flying south. This swarm of bees definitely had a single destination, someplace suited for bees to live, whereas those human planes—they were pursuing the bee swarm. Their purpose was to kill the bees, because those were bees that had acquired human genes. Among the monsters in the wilderness, arthropods were a very weak group, so if they were not eradicated, human genes would spread throughout the entire

wilderness by way of the food chain. If those monsters united to attack the base, it would be very dangerous.

As for why the humans were able to track those bees, he did not know. For the moment, it seemed that his black bee was not within the scope of the pursuit.

He looked at the plane, which was small and seemed to be some kind of fighter craft. It flew very unsteadily, shaking like mad in the air. With a frown, An Zhe quietly watched as the plane gave a violent shudder, burst into a ball of flame in the distant sky, and plummeted down.

He had seen the same spectacle twice during the day as well. Humankind's airplanes frequently had accidents, but he didn't know why.

An Zhe wrapped his clothes around himself tightly and closed his eyes. The roar in the sky was constant, but he was hidden beneath the black bee and it was nighttime, so humans ought to be unable to see him.

Just as he was about to awaken, a loud noise made him give a sudden start, and he opened his eyes.

The wind was very strong, and the roaring noise was loud as well, loud to the point of being strange. An Zhe strove to open his eyes and look at the source. A hundred meters away, one of humankind's small fighter planes suddenly shook in the air. Its nose dipped downward, and then it slammed into the ground with a loud crash. One wing snapped, and the entire plane tilted to one side.

The ground trembled, and thick smoke rose from the plane.

Frowning even more deeply, An Zhe got up and walked in that direction. Sometimes, it was very difficult for him to describe the motivation driving his behavior, just like the day he dragged the grievously wounded and dying An Ze back to his cave.

The cabin door was deformed, having warped and cracked. When An Zhe pushed open the broken cabin door with all his might, a human body rolled out. Clad in the dark blue uniform of a military pilot, he was covered

with blood, and his eyes were closed. An Zhe bent down carefully to check for his breath.

He was already dead.

He climbed into the cockpit. In the cockpit's other seat, there was another dead person. An Zhe went inside, and behind were the passenger cabin and weapons cabin. He thought that the two people in front were already no longer breathing and thus beyond saving, but perhaps he could find some supplies here.

In this manner, he walked into the back cabin.

The very next moment, he became completely dumbstruck.

To one side in front of him, there was a person. He was completely still, his head resting against the back of the seat in front.

An Zhe's breathing was about to stop. He strode over to the person, then lifted up his upper body and saw his face.

It was Lu Feng.

Lu Feng was also dead.

An Zhe was completely unable to describe his emotions at the moment. Lu Feng… was dead?

He had no time whatsoever to think about why Lu Feng would appear here. He could only shakily check for his breath.

The following moment, his emotions changed dramatically—he was still breathing. The cabin was in very good condition, and the seat belt had also been buckled very securely. Lu Feng had not been struck by anything, so it must have been that the force of impact during the crash was too big, causing him to pass out.

Within the entirety of the cramped space was the smell of something burning, and a wisp of smoke drifted over from the cockpit.

He knew they couldn't linger here.

Lu Feng's gun was clipped to his waist. An Zhe took it, then pulled Lu Feng up. Draping the man's arm around his shoulders, An Zhe attempted to

move him out.

But it was too difficult. He could not budge Lu Feng, for the distance between the seat and front wall was too small. The acrid burning smell became increasingly strong. From a communicator came the hissing sound of electricity, and it was mixed with an operator's shouts. "United Front Center to Colonel Lu Feng, please respond."

"United Front Center to Fighter PJ103, please respond."

The smoke was getting thicker, and the engine roared. An Zhe gritted his teeth and yanked hard—

He saw Lu Feng abruptly open his eyes.

The world went spinning. Lu Feng reached out and grabbed him, then kicked open the emergency exit door on the side, and the steel debris went tumbling down with the thick smoke. Then he yanked An Zhe to himself, and the two of them fell hard onto the ground below, but Lu Feng did not stop there. Holding An Zhe's wrist in one hand and clasping An Zhe's shoulder with his other hand, he exerted his strength outward, and together they fell into a slight depression in the ground nearby.

It was a little painful. An Zhe unconsciously held on tight to Lu Feng, and the very next second, there was the sound of a deafening explosion in his ears!

In the shallow pit, the ground trembled and rocks rolled down. An Zhe lifted his head and saw a brilliant and powerful firework explode in the night sky. A raging inferno burst to life around the fighter plane, its heat radiating against his face and its glow resembling perpetual golden lightning, and an explosion sent the wreckage of the plane flying like shooting stars in all directions. Someone's broken hand was thrown high into the sky with the firework, where it hung briefly at the peak before falling. The wrist landed outside, and the palm landed not far from them, stirring up a puff of dust.

The plane had blown itself up, just like the two accidents An Zhe had witnessed before.

The sound of the explosion ceased three seconds later, and the surrounding fields went quiet, with only the sounds of the wind and flames being blown by the wind remaining as thick smoke billowed up.

A narrow escape.

If he hadn't gone inside the plane, perhaps Lu Feng's life would have ended in that explosion, and he would have never known who had died in that accident.

Or, even if he did go inside the plane but Lu Feng hadn't woken up in time, the ones to have died would have been both of them.

Having barely gotten away with his life, his heart felt a little suffocated, his blood surged, and his ears rang. All he could hear was the sound of their breathing.

After a long while, he heard Lu Feng murmur, "… Thank you."

An Zhe gasped for a few breaths, his body aching all over. The places that got hurt when he rolled on the ground were no big deal; the residual effects from the electrocution and the soldiers' rough treatment were worse.

An Zhe lifted his head.

In this manner, he and Lu Feng locked eyes.

In the few seconds that they locked eyes, the pain of the electricity stabbing through his entire body arose from the depths of An Zhe's consciousness, and he seemed to have returned to that cramped and ice-cold interrogation room. It was just that this time, the interrogator became Lu Feng.

He felt a greater sense of danger and fear from Lu Feng than anyone else.

Lu Feng looked at him for a long time, but An Zhe could not understand his expression.

He only heard Lu Feng ask, very low and one syllable at a time, "An Zhe?"

An Zhe said nothing.

The name on his ID card was An Ze, but he called himself An Zhe. Even if it was commonplace in the Outer City to be dissatisfied with one's randomly assigned name and thus take the liberty to change it, it still could not cover up the fact that this in itself was a flaw.

That pair of eyes—those eyes that seemed able to see through everything—were exactly the same as the ones from the day they first met. The day he walked through the city gates, he had been prepared to die under the Arbiter's gun, but that day, Lu Feng had spared him.

But he could not escape. This Trial was merely two months late in its arrival.

He heard Lu Feng ask coldly, "Where is the sample?"

An Zhe could not answer this question, but the Arbiter's tone of voice and authority were more frightening to him than electrocution. He bit down hard on his lip. In the end, he said, "I ate it… It's gone."

Lu Feng's fingers gently pressed down on his abdomen. Through a thin layer of fabric, the feeling of the touch was frighteningly distinct, and An Zhe felt numb all over from terror. He understood beyond a shadow of a doubt that if Lu Feng knew that the spore could still be removed, he would cut open An Zhe's body without the slightest hesitation, just like how he had cut An Zhe's hyphae apart with a military knife half a year ago.

He was unable to think. With his mind blank, he could only watch Lu Feng. Beneath the light of the moon and the flames, the Colonel was expressionless, without a hint of warmth in his thin and long eyebrows or his cold green eyes, nor were there any visible emotions. He was forever perfect and cold-hearted.

An Zhe softly panted for breath. He had hidden Lu Feng's gun behind himself, and now he was continuing to surreptitiously push it further back,

wishing to hide it even better.

In any case, without his gun, Lu Feng couldn't… couldn't do anything to him.

However, this movement made Lu Feng notice the gun instead, and his eyes turned chillier. With remarkably quick movements and inexorable strength, he securely restrained An Zhe in a one-handed embrace, and with his other hand he pried open An Zhe's fingers and snatched away the gun.

Gasping for breath, An Zhe desperately struggled against—

"Bang!"

A gunshot rang out.

An Zhe's mind went blank for a moment, but then he found that he was still alive. He heard the sound of something heavy falling to the ground in the distance accompanied by a monster's roar, and when he turned around, he saw a lizard-class monster that Lu Feng had squarely hit flailing about as it fell.

An Zhe felt cold all over. He knew that in this world, he and that monster were the same, whereas Lu Feng and they were eternal foes, forever unable to come to an accord.

Right at that moment, choppy and distorted noises came once again from Lu Feng's communicator amidst the sounds of harsh static. "Uni… Center to… 03, please…"

In a cold voice, Lu Feng replied to the call, "PJ103 has received comms. The fighter plane has crashed, and the pilot is confirmed dead."

"Please… mission progress. Send… coordinates."

The voice became increasingly distorted and choppy. If it was not because a problem had occurred with the communicator, then it was that the base's communication network covering the wilderness had collapsed again. During the month that he was in the Outer City, An Zhe had learned from snippets of the mercenary teams' conversations that the signal out in the wilderness had never been good.

He heard Lu Feng say flatly, "The target is under control."

"… order. Confirm… xenogenic type. Get the lost… clues… shot dead. Please—"

"Do you hear me?" Lu Feng's voice was hoarse. At the end of his sentence, there seemed to be a bit of a tremble, but there was more of a tough coldness. "Answer me."

The ice-cold muzzle of the gun pressed against An Zhe's temple. For the first time in his life, he realized how close he was to death, and terror held firm sway over him. Trembling, he said, "I… I won't hand it over."

"PJ103, please immediately—"

The sound of the broadcast from the communicator pushed all emotions to their apex.

Then it came to an abrupt stop the very next moment.

"Bzz—"

The static grew louder. It started as a rustle, then it became a long buzz, and finally, after a high-frequency sound that shot up, it suddenly disappeared.

Taking its place was a soft female voice with a gentle frequency. "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the base's signal has been interrupted. This is normal. Please refrain from panicking and carry out all activities as usual. The communication signal will recover at some point. At that time, the public broadcasts will be sent to you, so please stay tuned."

"I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere…"

An Zhe was still being securely held. They were so close that it was a distance where the peril had reached its maximum. Lu Feng could kill him anytime and anywhere, and he could feel Lu Feng's heartbeat and breaths—his face clearly looked so calm, but the rate of his heartbeat was not at all slow.

The fingers Lu Feng was holding An Zhe's shoulder with tightened, coincidentally touching his injury. An Zhe gave a start, and his vision was covered with a layer of mist. With his body trembling, he let out a whimper.

The ice-cold muzzle of the gun was still pressed to his temple, having not been warmed up by his body heat in the slightest. Likewise, the terror and shadow of death had not retreated even a little. An Zhe opened his mouth, and in that moment, he was practically unable to even speak. He knew he had already fallen apart—if mushrooms could also fall apart.

Everything he had seen in his life flashed before his eyes, but he could not grasp anything nor obtain anything. Merely two nights ago, he was still thinking about how exactly to lie in order to protect the Colonel.

"I… won't hand it over to you." He protected his abdomen with his hands, his voice both trembling so badly that he could not form whole sentences and carrying the undertone of a sob. "I… hate you."

The muzzle of the gun suddenly trembled.

"… Please stay tuned."

The final sound of the broadcast played.

Everything went silent.

The fire of the wreckage went out, and the sound of the communicator stopped. All communications had been cut off.

Here, there was no trace of human existence, only open country all around and unbroken desert that connected directly to the night sky.

Just like humankind had never existed. No humans, no human culture, and no human base. All of the—all of the exhausting entanglements and all of the painful struggles disappeared along with the signal, suddenly dissipating like ashes and smoke.

Upon this ancient desert, only the two of them remained.

With a muffled thump, the gun fell to the ground.

Lu Feng closed his eyes and held An Zhe tightly in his arms.

33

"SOMETIMES, HE WANTED TO PROTECT EVERYONE."

THE MOMENT LU FENG wrapped his arms around him, An Zhe began to tremble violently.

Slumped against Lu Feng, An Zhe's forehead was pressed to his shoulder. He was completely unable to describe his emotional state in that moment, only feeling like a hand had curled around his heart and tightened its grip. Fierce pain inundated him, and fat droplets of a warm liquid gushed from his eyes. He knew that he was crying and that those were tears, something that only humans had, but this was his first time experiencing this sort of feeling—the feeling that his heart was being torn to pieces.

Why did things become like this?

He thought, if Lu Feng hadn't spared him two months ago, had his identity as a xenogenic been revealed and had Lu Feng taken him out, then he wouldn't feel so sad about betraying Lu Feng's trust.

If he and Lu Feng had not established something akin to friendship over these past several days, then when facing the muzzle of Lu Feng's gun, perhaps he would not have been so afraid.

And if, supposing Lu Feng hadn't held him in the end, perhaps he would not have felt… so hurt.

Why Lu Feng put down the gun, he did not know. He had never before experienced such intense emotions that he was even unable to take care of other matters.

He understood nothing at all, but just like that, he cried for a very long time. Even when no more tears came out, he was still sniffling sporadically.

The night deepened, and after finally calming down, An Zhe noticed that their surroundings were silent as well. It was like there was nothing left but the two of them in this world. He buried himself in Lu Feng's shoulder. Chest against chest, the slight tremor of heartbeats was transmitted through the fabric, though who it came from was indistinguishable.

They were both still alive.

He rubbed his eyes and asked in a slightly hoarse voice, "Why did you fall?"

"Engine breakdown," Lu Feng said. "I'm going to get the black box."

An Zhe hummed in response and let go of Lu Feng. This hug seemed to have lasted too long. When they separated, the wind of the wilderness filled the space that had been intimately seamless, and it was very cold. An Zhe gently shivered. Lu Feng draped his coat over An Zhe, then got up and walked toward the wreckage of the plane. It was a small fighter plane, so the wreckage was by no means large. An Zhe watched as Lu Feng pried open the tail of the plane with the parts scattered on the ground and fetched a bright orange box from within.

He thought about the various things that had happened today and said, "I saw many planes fall."

Lu Feng hummed flatly in response.

Even though An Zhe was only a mushroom, he also knew that it was very odd for engine failures to occur in so many planes at the same time. He asked, "Why?"

"I don't know. It can only be analyzed after getting back to the base." Lu Feng put the box away and walked over to him. "Where are you living?"

"On the ground," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng raised his eyebrows.

An Zhe promptly shut his mouth and said nothing more. This phrase "on the ground" was really not like what a human would say.

But Lu Feng very quickly noticed the only unusual things upon this patch of wasteland—the black bee and the backpack on the ground—and walked in their direction. An Zhe followed, but pain lanced through his lower leg, for he had knocked it against something earlier.

Lu Feng turned back to look at him. An Zhe bit down on his lower lip, then limped after Lu Feng.

Then, Lu Feng picked him up in a piggyback carry.

Since this was the second time he was carried by the Colonel in such a manner, An Zhe comfortably settled in. They were very close, the distance unlike what humans and xenogenics should maintain.

But just for tonight, the Colonel did not seem to be the Colonel, and the xenogenic did not seem to be a xenogenic.

While hugging Lu Feng's neck, An Zhe vaguely felt the line of a thin cord. His fingers moved slightly downward and encountered something cool to the touch.

A hard pendant hung from Lu Feng's neck as well.

Escaping from death by Lu Feng's hand seemed to have given him a significant increase in courage. Moreover, the pendant's shape was also far too familiar. With his fingers pressed against Lu Feng's neck, he fished the object out, and Lu Feng himself said nothing, seeming to tacitly allow this action.

At the end of the silvery metal chain, a brass-colored bullet shell gleamed with a dull light beneath the aurora.

His own bullet pendant represented his lost spore, but why did Lu Feng also have one? An Zhe did not know what this meant, so he made a soft questioning noise.

He heard Lu Feng say flatly, "My father."

An Zhe said nothing. After approximately three minutes, he stuffed the pendant back beneath Lu Feng's shirt, docilely rested his head against Lu Feng's shoulder, and drew in his arms, no longer squirming around.

Through the clothes, Lu Feng felt the boy on his back initially tense up a little with anxiety, then gradually relax until his entire body was hanging off him. After the day's events, An Zhe was still able to lean on him without the slightest bit of caution. This boy would always act in ways that exceeded his expectations.

An Zhe's warm breath puffed against his shoulder. On his back was the normal weight of a boy his age, but to Lu Feng, it was by no means heavy. He stuck to Lu Feng like cotton, lacking any vigilance whatsoever, as though the dangers and terrors of this world ought to have nothing to do with him.

Lu Feng remembered when he joined the Trial Court.

He did not have any particular reason for entering the Trial Court. Sometimes, he wanted to protect everyone.

But in reality, he had protected some people and hurt many others. Though he had not originally intended to, he had already become the target of everyone's hatred.

As he walked, An Zhe's breathing became lighter and more even; he had cried for a very long time today, so it probably tired him out. Just like all other innocent little things, perhaps this small xenogenic was about to fall asleep.

Lu Zhen also remembered that one month ago, on the afternoon when insects were wreaking havoc in the city, he had received An Zhe's phone call. His voice was soft, like he was afraid. That was his seventh year of being the Arbiter. In these seven years, it was the first time he had been asked for help. Nobody else would do such a thing.

In this kind of age, protecting everyone was nothing but a fantasy doomed to be broken, but he thought he could at least protect a certain

person—at least, the moment he was asked for help, this fleeting hope arose in his heart.

When he was put down, An Zhe was on the verge of falling asleep. Lu Feng used his own coat as a blanket to cover him with, but he clearly did not know how to take care of others, for the badge on his chest scratched An Zhe again. Half-awake, An Zhe detached it and discovered that it was the exact one he had always been carrying around while at the base. When he escaped in hyphae form, everything on his person, including this badge, had probably fallen to the ground, but now the badge had returned to Lu Feng.

Grasping it, An Zhe became significantly more awake, and he cautiously asked, "Did the doctor say anything to you?"

Lu Feng looked down at him. "What is it that you want to say?"

An Zhe said in a small voice, "… Nothing."

Lu Feng did indeed plan to explain to him in all seriousness, but then he saw the little xenogenic curl himself up into a small ball with the backpack in his arms. In the moonlight, a pair of jet-black eyes looked at him earnestly, as though it were easy to produce surges of emotion.

So Lu Feng let out a scornful laugh and said, "You think you have such great capabilities?"

An Zhe rolled over, turning his back to Lu Feng.

An Zhe did not accept Lu Feng's evaluation. He thought that Lu Feng was emphasizing how weak he was again, for this was not the first time he had said such a thing.

Although he truly could not cause the infection of the entire Garden of Eden. He could not infect even a single person.

But he could not accept that the reason for his lie being seen through was because of his own weakness, rather than because the lie was not clever enough. He could only comfort himself by thinking that perhaps only Lu Feng did not believe his words.

Only Lu Feng was hateful.

He said, "You aren't allowed to sleep here."

"Hm?" Lu Feng said.

An Zhe mumbled, "You aren't allowed to."

"Why not?" Lu Feng asked.

With his back turned to Lu Feng, An Zhe buried himself in the coat. He had originally wanted to say nothing at all, only wishing to resolutely drive out the Colonel from his territory, but after internally debating with himself, he nevertheless sincerely explained the reason. "You may experience contactless infection."

"Oh." Lu Feng's voice was very low. "The bee is alive."

An Zhe was silent.

Then he heard Lu Feng ask, "It's alive, so why is it unconscious?"

This time, even if An Zhe was beaten to death, he would no longer say anything. With this Lu Feng person, provided that you revealed to him a scrap of information, he would be able to guess the situation with crystal clarity.

But tonight's Colonel did not give him a hard time. He said, "I'll take the night watch."

An Zhe made a small sound of acknowledgment, then asked, "Are you cold?"

Lu Feng said, "No."

Only then did An Zhe close his eyes. Holding the badge in his hand, he curled up. Tonight, his emotions had been overtaxed, so he fell asleep especially quickly.

However, midway through his sleep, he was woken up by the cold.

Over the past few days, the failure of the magnetic field led to the solar winds wreaking havoc. The atmosphere had thinned out, and the temperature differences between day and night had reached a frightening extent.

An Zhe felt cold all over. He opened his eyes, sat up, and unconsciously looked around, searching for Lu Feng's figure.

He very easily spotted the Colonel not far away. Lu Feng was leaning against a rock that had been eroded into a strange shape by the wind, and in front of him were some branches of shrubbery piled into a conical shape.

An Zhe rubbed his eyes. Then, holding Lu Feng's coat in his arms, he walked over. The Colonel had draped his jacket over An Zhe, so his own upper body was only dressed in a uniform shirt.

An Zhe held out the coat and asked once again, "Are you cold?"

Lu Feng was playing with a lighter in his hands.

"You can wear it," he said. "I thought you could still sleep a while longer."

"… Huh?"

Lu Feng tossed the lighter into his arms. "Come gather firewood with me."

In other words, the Colonel had already known that he may be woken up by the cold and had planned to start a fire.

And as for him saying "I thought you could still sleep a while longer"—An Zhe translated the Colonel's rare roundabout phrasing and finally understood that what the Colonel actually wanted to say was "How could you be even more fragile than I thought?"

An Zhe said nothing.

He followed Lu Feng. For a time, there was only their footsteps, the sound of the wind, and the faint howling of distant monsters in the air. They walked outward. In the wilds were sparse growths of shrubs that had been killed and baked dry by the solar wind's assault, making them suitable for burning.

An Zhe asked, "Have you been looking for branches the entire time?"

"No," Lu Feng said flatly. "There are monsters, so I couldn't go too far away."

"Oh," An Zhe said softly. He wanted to tell Lu Feng that in fact many monsters had no interest in a mushroom like him, but then he realized that Lu Feng was protecting him. At that thought, he felt a bit of happiness well up within him.

The sand of the desert was soft beneath their feet, and their footsteps produced only soft, subtle sounds. An Zhe's leg still made walking a little inconvenient. Lu Feng did not have him follow closely, but rather ensured that he stayed within his line of sight, then collected nearby branches and gave them to An Zhe to hold on to.

When the branches in his arms increased to the point where he was somewhat unable to hold them, Lu Feng said, "That's enough."

So they walked back side by side. In the moonlight, the rolling sand dunes resembled snowdrifts, and the distant airplane wreckage was rooted in the ground like an ugly tumor.

Suddenly, Lu Feng's footsteps paused.

An Zhe promptly stopped as well.

A strange instinct sent a chill up his spine, and he heard a noise.

In the quiet wilderness, there suddenly came a noise that was impossible to accurately describe, and he knew Lu Feng had heard it as well.

"Rustle."

"Rustle."

"Rustle."

The eerie noise resounded irregularly in the wilderness. It was very low, yet also very clear, as if it were right in their ears. The first two intervals were extremely long, and the last one was very short.

"Rustle."

When the noise sounded again, Lu Feng pressed down on An Zhe's shoulder, and the two of them lay flat on the sand, hiding behind a shrub.

"Rustle."

Beneath the aurora, a massive black shape appeared at the boundary of the rolling sand dunes. It was roughly oval in shape, the structure of its body nebulous, and its skin was uneven, just like a mass of decaying meat that had been roughly pinched together. A smooth lump of flesh bulged out from the middle of its body, with eyeballs large and small covering its surface. That was its head. Beneath the body of this black shape were countless feet, some thick and some slender. Some of them resembled reptile legs, some of them resembled insect pincers, and some of them resembled human arms.

The legs swarmed, supporting it as it lumbered across the uneven ground and left a wavy trail more than five meters wide on the sand-covered ground. In this manner, its posture strange, it came to the wreckage of the airplane crash. Every time it moved a certain distance, the rustling sound was emitted from its body surface, diffusing evenly outward. Perhaps that was its vocal organ.

Holding his breath, An Zhe watched as a gap split open in the middle of the indescribable monster, revealing densely packed tusks and fangs within.

"Crunch—"

The piercing sound of metal being scraped came, followed by the chaotic sounds of metal being struck, fractured, chewed, and swallowed.

It was eating the wreckage. Even after having lived in the Abyss for so long, An Zhe had never known that there were some monsters that could feed on metal. In the Abyss were many armored vehicles that had lost their owners, along with the fragmented parts of guns, but no monsters paid them any heed. Or perhaps the objective of this monster before their eyes was not the metal, but the bodies of the two pilots in the wreckage. One could imagine that, to a strange creature capable of biting apart and swallowing alloys, human flesh and bones were as soft and easily chewed as slush.

Instead of enjoying the giant explosion and burning wreckage, it just ate fewer than five bites.

"Rustle."

When that mouth closed, the sound was emitted again. It turned in a certain direction, and a hundred meters in front of it was the still-unconscious black bee.

“Crunch.”

The entirety of the black bee's head disappeared into its body. An Zhe opened his eyes wide and watched as one end of the monster's body stretched out. A pair of translucent, metallic wings dropped out and vibrated a few times, making the same kind of noise as leaves shaking in the autumn wind—the parts that once belonged to the black bee appeared now on its body.

"Rustle."

In the following second, all of the eyes on its head looked in An Zhe and Lu Feng's direction.

34

“FOR YOU ARE WITH ME.”

"RUSTLE."

This sound wave seemed to set off a ripple in the air. In an instant, An Zhe realized that it did not rely on sight, but rather sound to determine locations.

Countless legs wriggled as it moved in their direction.

"Bang!"

A gunshot rang out in the night sky, and the wind blew past An Zhe. Lu Feng had climbed high up onto a rock at an unimaginable speed and fired his first shot.

The rustling ceased. *The eyes on its body slowly turned, and it emitted a low and dull intermittent howling. Its windpipe must be full of pustules*, An Zhe thought.

The second shot hit an eye in its upper right area.

The howling grew louder, and An Zhe's eyes flew wide open.

Blood.

Blackish-red blood was welling up from the wounded eye—not welling up, but spraying out instead.

Lu Feng fired several shots in a row. The opening gradually festered and increased in size, and blood burst out like a fountain. The monster's howls grew many times louder.

An Zhe looked up at Lu Feng and saw that his gaze was calm, as if everything was as he had expected.

He looked back at the monster. Its wings vibrated, but its body was too heavy to truly fly. It made a mad dash forward and squarely struck the rock where Lu Feng was. With a loud noise, the rock trembled, and dust and debris fell. Although Lu Feng was standing on it, he did not move an inch —he looked down, observing the massive glob of flesh.

Hitting the rock made it bleed out even faster; it was like an open waterskin. As An Zhe looked at this unimaginable sight, he suspected that the monster's body was simply composed of myriad fluids.

After the tenth impact, the sound weakened, and its colossal body slowly toppled over.

There was not only blood, for chunks of flesh and oddly shaped organs had also flowed out from the opening. The heart and lungs were fused together, a runny semi-solid mass, and an indescribable stench pervaded the entire area. Even the monsters of the Abyss did not have internal organs with such an indescribable structure.

"… Hm?"

There was a blank spot in An Zhe's knowledge. He looked up at Lu Feng, and Lu Feng's eyebrows lifted slightly before he jumped down and landed at An Zhe's side. "What is it?"

"… Just like that?" An Zhe asked.

"Just like that," Lu Feng said.

"It died so easily," An Zhe said.

"Mm-hm." Lu Feng put the gun away. In his cold white fingers, the gunstock gently spun in a circle before being tucked into the holster at his waist.

An Zhe was greatly confused, even beginning to wonder that if he were to be shot, what kind of circumstance it would be under. He felt a little afraid.

Lu Feng glanced at him, a slight smile in his eyes, and then turned and walked outward.

The monster's ugliness exceeded An Zhe's imaginings, and the speed at which it fell also exceeded them. There was no shortage of huge and ugly species in the Abyss, but the pile of ruined meat before their eyes clearly did not conform to the rule that within the Abyss, the uglier a monster was, the stronger it was.

Just like that, the monster's carcass fell onto the sand dunes, and black and red pus flowed out from beneath its body, dyeing that patch of soil a dark hue. The same pus had also moistened the nearby shrubbery. First, it gradually hung like a drop of dew, but a minute later, it contracted back and integrated into the shrub's foliage—it had been absorbed.

Lu Feng cast a glance at his watch. Thirty minutes after the monster was confirmed dead, he approached it, and An Zhe followed—although he was still limping a bit.

Its grotesque body shone with a strange metallic luster beneath the aurora. Although all of the body's parts came from various creatures, they were all firmly connected, growing from within the body. Upon recalling how it devoured the black bee, An Zhe realized that if it devoured a creature's genes, it would immediately grow the organ governed by that particular portion of its genes.

After observing the monster for a long time, Lu Feng said to An Zhe, "Let's go."

An Zhe asked, "Go where?"

"There may still be many of these kinds of things here," Lu Feng said. "We're going to find a safe place."

An Zhe looked around, but there was nothing in his field of vision save for a dusty desert. He asked, "Where are we going?"

"There are ruins up ahead," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe thought, *How come I didn’t see any ruins when I was flying in the sky?*

But then he thought some more. He had been riding a bee, while the Colonel's means of transportation was an airplane, so of course the Colonel's field of vision would be wider than his.

He heard Lu Feng ask him, "Can you walk?"

"I can," An Zhe replied.

He actually was not a mushroom who feared pain.

Although he really was in a bit of pain.

The Colonel gave him a flat look and said, "Come here."

In the end, An Zhe went back to being carried. He hugged Lu Feng's neck, and with his head buried in Lu Feng's shoulder, he could feel Lu Feng's breathing along with the movements as he walked. In fact, the rolling hills were only suitable for four-legged reptiles to walk around on. When stepping upon it, the sandy ground would sink slightly; it was not suited to the exertion of force by bones and muscles. It seemed that only footless snake-class creatures could be at home in this kind of environment. Many places in this world were unsuited for human activity. Walking here demanded a greater expenditure of strength, and carrying a person by piggyback demanded even more. But Lu Feng seemed to not be stingy with it. In An Zhe's limited recollections, apart from not liking to talk, the Colonel did not seem to be stingy with anything.

Amidst a stretch of silence, An Zhe looked behind himself. Beneath the boundless black sky, he saw a line of footsteps of varying depths in the snow-white sand, seeming like some sort of profound symbol.

He suddenly recalled that day in the Garden of Eden. That day, when he was passing through the spacious corridor, several white officers had gathered in an empty room and were reciting a beautiful verse, and the one leading them was holding a silver cross. Back then, the magnetic field had disappeared, the power supply had been cut off, and everyone was gripped

in the chaotic throes of fear, but their expressions were very peaceful, as though they had received some sort of strength that could support them in their movement forward.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." He repeated this tranquil verse for Lu Feng to hear. "For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

In the cold, Lu Feng's voice seemed to contain a hint of warmth. "Is there more?"

An Zhe strove to remember. "Certainly goodness and faithfulness will follow me all the days of my life."

"And my dwelling will be in the house of the Lord forever."

"They believed,"

An Zhe said. "In God?"

He remembered that in the manuscripts An Ze had written for the base, words like God or gods had appeared.

Lu Feng gave a flat "hmm" in response.

An Zhe asked, "Then what about you?"

Lu Feng did not reply.

He did not speak, and in the quiet night there was only the unnerving sound of the wind. An Zhe recited the poems he had memorized from the children's textbooks and other places to Lu Feng one line at a time, whether simple or complex, until he reached "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." After reciting them, he started from the beginning again. Neither he nor Lu Feng had much to say or any small talk to make. He wished to say something to make this still and deserted night a bit more lively, so he could only do this.

The wind was so strong that An Zhe's voice was quickly dispersed, but they were in such close proximity that he knew Lu Feng could hear.

By the time he repeated all the poems twice, they had walked for a very long while.

An Zhe did not know what kind of training the Colonel had undergone with the military, but he knew that this road and this night were both too long. So long that it seemed like they could walk for a lifetime and walk to the boundary of this world or the ends of their own lives. This process's consumption of physical energy also surpassed what the normal human body could hold.

He surreptitiously transformed part of his body into light mycelium, then feared that this slight change was trivial, so then he surreptitiously transformed some more.

At last, he heard Lu Feng ask, "Do you know why that monster died so easily?"

An Zhe did not know why Lu Feng would suddenly mention this. He stopped reciting the verse and said, "No."

"Low-level mutations are from genetic contamination, and high-level mutated monsters are divided into two types," Lu Feng said, "hybrid class and polymorphic class."

"After hybrid-class monsters consume genes, they will have a part of the original organism, and the genes and characteristics of many creatures can coexist in its body. But it has a buffer period." As Lu Feng walked forward, he continued talking. "There's a span of time in which the original genes and newly acquired genes conflict with each other. Within this time, its DNA strands are violently changing, conflicting with the original organs' functions, so the body's interior is a mess. Therefore, the intervals at which smart hybrid-class monsters consume genes are very long, for they need to establish stable genes. That one just now got greedy."

An Zhe asked, "What about the polymorphic-class ones?"

"The polymorphic-class ones are the highest-level mutations that have been observed for now, few in number and mainly concentrated within the Abyss. The way they mutate is not by genes coexisting, but rather freely

changing. For example, changing from a bee to a type of plant… Sometimes they can also change partially."

"The gene sequences of polymorphic-class mutants are more stable than those of hybrid-class ones," Lu Feng said flatly. "But they also cannot take in too much at once, since it will affect their minds. The Trial Court once had a case in which an animal and plant polymorphic monster underwent an incomplete transformation, had fibrous tissue form in all its organs, and died on the spot."

Slightly afraid, An Zhe tightly hugged Lu Feng's neck in silence.

He always felt that the Colonel's words carried a deeper meaning.

On the road, they once again saw another hybrid-class monster.

It was different from the monster who fell to Lu Feng's gun. Skinny and dark gray, it was like a stick insect that had been magnified some tens of thousands of times. On its back were huge, thin wings that only butterflies had, and extending from its forehead were two slender antennae, but its eyes were not visible. Its whole body was five meters long, and it had six skinny feet. While they were climbing a high slope, it was consuming a two-meter-long lizard. Its glossy, chitin-covered body originally reflected the aurora's light, but as it ate, the chitin gradually turned into rough scales.

Its light and nimble body allowed it to move swiftly. After eating the lizard's head, the stick insect leaned its torso down, then sprang forward, the remnants of the lizard's body dangling from its mouth as it flew away, wings flapping. It had not discovered Lu Feng and An Zhe.

Perhaps it was one of those smart hybrid monsters Lu Feng spoke of, understanding that it needed to first find a place to hide after obtaining genes where it could get through the chaotic phase.

As An Zhe looked at its snow-white wings, he said with sincerity, "It's so pretty."

He himself was also white, and he liked the color of his hyphae, but he didn't have such outstretched and beautiful wings. Even if he changed completely into his original form, he would only be a soft mass. Ever since that rainy season from his early life in which he was snapped in half by rainfall and gales, he had lost the shape that a mushroom ought to have and had even been defined as a "xenogenic that had broken away from the basic form of its species," which made him feel ashamed.

He heard Lu Feng's cold voice. "You wish to eat it?"

An Zhe said nothing.

"That's not it," he finally said.

Lu Feng said, "Don't eat things willy-nilly."

An Zhe replied in a small voice, "It's not like I can beat them."

The corners of Lu Feng's mouth twitched upward slightly.

As a xenogenic, being prohibited from eating things willy-nilly by a human made An Zhe angry. He should have the right to eat freely.

Then his stomach gurgled.

Lu Feng asked, "Where are your things?"

An Zhe thought back to the amount of food, which was not enough for even a single meal. He said, "Wait."

After some thinking, he asked Lu Feng, "Are you hungry?"

Lu Feng said, "I'm all right."

An Zhe thought that this human was being stubborn. He easily dug out the remaining half a piece of hardtack from his backpack, broke off a piece, and fed it to Lu Feng.

The Colonel did not refuse it.

An Zhe continued to feed him. At the third piece, he thought of how the hardtack was excessively dry and ought to be eaten with water.

There was only half a bottle of water left as well. He took it out, but he did not know how he ought to feed it to the Colonel.

He could only say, "Stop for a while."

Thus, at daybreak, he and Lu Feng shared half of the remaining half bottle of water behind a large rock. Water was something that made mushrooms happy. An Zhe licked his lips, after which Lu Feng immediately stuffed a piece of hardtack into his mouth.

The cool fingers accidentally touched his lips. With the piece of hardtack in his mouth, An Zhe slowly swallowed it, unexpectedly feeling very at ease. They were clearly almost out of food and water, and he did not know how they would continue living tomorrow.

He said to Lu Feng, "You eat it, I'm not the one exerting myself."

As a result, he did not need to eat much.

Saying nothing, Lu Feng rubbed An Zhe's head, and An Zhe looked up and met his gaze. He felt that in the pale early morning light, the Colonel's perpetually cold eyes had been colored with a hint of warmth.

At that moment, An Zhe suddenly felt the delusion that although he and Lu Feng were completely different, although the two of them lacked any common language—supposing the signals never returned, supposing there came a day when either Lu Feng and he were both xenogenics or he and Lu Feng were both human, supposing they were both still alive—if such a day truly came, perhaps he and Lu Feng could be very good friends.

Amongst humans, he himself was not a very outstanding individual, and could even be considered a worthless individual, but the Colonel was very good to him regardless. Therefore, if Lu Feng turned into a xenogenic, so long as he wasn't too ugly, An Zhe wouldn't dislike him.

However, such a possibility did not exist at all. Lu Feng was human, and he was unfortunately a mushroom. But supposing he had always been human, perhaps he would only have been an ordinary person of the Outer

City and not known Lu Feng at all, so he then felt lucky that he was a mushroom.

They continued walking. An Zhe felt that after the night had gone by, his leg did not hurt so much anymore, so he wanted to walk on his own rather than be carried by Lu Feng. When he was put down, he saw Lu Feng frowning slightly while looking to one side.

Beneath a massive rock nearby, fragments of two human skeletons lay scattered. The skulls rested far from the broken spines, the hand bones were missing, and an ashen leg bone was stuck into the sand at an angle as though it were a flagpole or gravestone.

After they walked closer, Lu Feng bent down and wiped a thin layer of ash from the bones with his fingers.

"Fresh, within the last two days," he said.

With those words, An Zhe's gaze turned uncertain as he looked at the human bones. In this kind of circumstance, there should not be any humans who could move around in the wilderness, so there should not be any fresh human bones either.

He asked, "Is it one of your pilots?"

Lu Feng looked around. "There's no wreckage."

They carefully checked the bones again. There were traces of monster bites on the bones, and buried beneath the sand nearby was a raggedy piece of clothing that was dark gray and not the base's standard dress. Lu Feng had a thoughtful look on his face, for this was absolutely not normal.

However, without any other clues, they could only move on.

After another half hour, within the morning mist, something faintly loomed in the distance. A thread of gray spread across the horizon, seeming like the edge of some giant city.

"I think I see it," An Zhe said.

Those must be the city ruins Lu Feng spoke of.

Lu Feng said, "I see it as well."

An Zhe asked, "Is it possible to find water and food in the ruins?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Lu Feng said impassively, "I often stay in ruins."

"… Oh."

Colonel Lu was a man who could come and go freely even in the Abyss.

However, to not be starved to death was still something worth being happy about. Even his footsteps became more springy, and he took one step ahead of Lu Feng.

Right at that moment, the ground beneath his feet suddenly softened!

Then it sagged.

He started falling.

"Ah!!"

His heart thumped violently. He was about to turn into hyphae form from fear, but in a flash, a heavy force traveled down his left arm—Lu Feng had firmly grasped his hand. Hanging in midair, An Zhe let out a sigh of relief, after which Lu Feng hauled him back up. Just as his leg recovered, his arm began to hurt sharply, and he softly inhaled. Lu Feng reached out and ran his hand all the way down from An Zhe's shoulder to his wrist, then said, "It's not broken."

An Zhe looked down.

It was a perilous three-meter-deep pit concealed with some brittle, thin planks that had been covered with sand. There was nothing visible to distinguish it from the surroundings, but so long as one stepped onto it, they would fall into the pit.

An Zhe thought it odd.

He saw that Lu Feng was frowning slightly as well.

"A pitfall trap, newly made by the looks of it," Lu Feng said.

In this place, first human bones appeared, and then a pitfall trap—both human-related things.

Could it be that there were people living out here in the wilderness?

Right at that moment, Lu Feng jerked his head up and looked in a particular direction. "Who is it?"

There was a dirt hump rising from the ground, looking completely ordinary in the hilly land. After Lu Feng spoke, there was no response whatsoever.

However, Lu Feng pulled out his gun and said grimly, "Come out."

There was no movement.

Ten seconds, twenty seconds, half a minute.

A rustling suddenly came from that direction, followed by a dull squeak, and An Zhe looked toward the source of the sounds. Soil rolled down the dirt hump's surface as something akin to a lid opened up, and a figure climbed out. He initially thought it was a groundhog, but upon a second look, it turned out to be a human, a living and seemingly non-mutated human clad in raggedy denim similar to the clothing next to the bones from earlier.

After standing up, the person was a scrawny boy. His complexion seemed especially pale due to lack of sunlight, but a few freckles were scattered across his cheeks.

He looked at them, seeming completely dumbfounded as he stared.

An Zhe silently returned the look.

Two full minutes passed before the boy stammered, "You… you two… Humans?"

The way he spoke was very unskilled and his pronunciations very strange, dissimilar to the common accent of the people of the base.

Lu Feng said, "Take us out of here first."

The boy stared at them, and his hands that were hanging at his sides trembled before he abruptly ran toward them. "Wait!"

He approached them by way of a circuitous route, then turned around to guide them, leading them around many twists and turns. As they walked, he

stammered, "I… I'm sorry. We were afraid… afraid of monsters approaching, so we dug a lot… a lot of pitfall traps. So they couldn't come, and we… we could keep watch… I… I didn't think anyone would come back. Are… are you okay?"

Seeing him hang his head, the very picture of remorse and self-blame, An Zhe said, "I'm fine."

Next to the dirt hump, the boy pushed some manner of device, and with a creak, a heavy iron gate unsteadily opened to reveal a pitch-black cave mouth.

"You're… you're people from the outside?" Seeming to have suddenly realized something, the boy turned toward them, tongue-tied. He had first looked at Lu Feng, but he seemed to have been frightened by Lu Feng's expressionless face, so he stiffly turned toward An Zhe and posed the question.

"We are," An Zhe said.

"I…" The boy took a few breaths, and the flush of excitement rose in his cheeks. If not for the half-meter distance between them, An Zhe suspected that he would be able to hear the thump-thump-thump-thump of the boy's violent heartbeats.

He asked, "Are you okay?"

"I…" The boy seemed to have finally realized what had just happened, and it looked like he was unable to catch his breath.

But then Lu Feng spoke. "Hello," he said. "Northern Base, Trial Court. Do you need help?"

"We… we do need help." The boy's eyes shone with a light like that of the rising sun, and he turned and dove into the tunnel, shouting as he ran into its depths, "Grandfather!"

Following him, Lu Feng and An Zhe also walked into the quiet and winding tunnel. After closing the iron gate, this place was cool and dark, but a weak flashing light was shining up ahead. The path underfoot was not

clearly visible, so An Zhe carefully placed a hand along the wall. Lu Feng grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward.

This was a flight of steep stairs leading down, where it was very easy to fall. It wasn't until after another downhill stretch approximately a hundred meters long and around another bend that the space widened somewhat. Gas lamps cast their feeble white glow upon the walls, illuminating the cramped interior of the cave. Looking into the distance, it was so deep as to be endless, and the sound of footsteps set off unabating echoes.

Lu Feng asked, "Did you people dig this?"

"No." the boy said. "It's a mine from a very long time ago. Many of us hid in here."

"How many people?" Lu Feng asked. "How long have you lived here?"

"I don't know." The boy hung his head slightly. "I was born here, and afterward, many people… died. My uncle left, so now there's only my grandfather and me."

Before they reached the place where the "grandfather" the boy spoke of was, An Zhe first heard a harsh gasp for breath, like the sound a dying animal would make from its chest.

In a ten-square-meter niche, a bed of iron wire less than a meter across had been placed within it, and on the bed lay a grizzled old man. An Zhe walked closer and saw that he was covered with a grayish-yellow blanket, his cheeks were gaunt, his eyes were clouded, and he was trembling all over as though he was suffering some great pain. Even though they had arrived at his bedside, he did not react at all.

"He's sick," the boy said.

As he spoke, he sat by the bed, picked up his grandfather's hand, and said loudly, "Grandfather, people from the outside have come to find us! They said they came from the base! The base really exists!"

The old man's mind was no longer lucid. Rather than being affected by the joy and excitement in the boy's words, he frowned and turned his head,

as if fleeing from the boy's clamor.

"We can go to a place with lots of people now!" Seemingly accustomed to it, the boy was not affected by the old man's negative attitude either. Instead, his tone of voice became more excited.

Right at that moment, the old man's wizened mouth moved as he spoke a few incoherent syllables.

His grandson said, "What?"

An Zhe listened carefully as well. The old man's lips moved, once again repeating those syllables.

"It's…" With his throat raspy and his mouth leaking air, his voice sounded like a decrepit wind. "It's… almost time."

The boy apologetically turned to Lu Feng and An Zhe. "Grandfather always says this. He thinks he's very sick and close to death."

After saying that, he told the old man, "We're going to the place where all the humans are. There will definitely be medicine there."

But the old man tossed and turned, still saying the same thing, so they could only give up. Up until they left, the old man was still mumbling "it's almost time." An Zhe thought this sentence sounded very familiar, but he could not recall where he had heard it before.

Then the boy took them to a slightly more spacious rectangular room. The room, connected to three pitch-black tunnels that forked off, was like a heartland that sprawled in all directions. Yellowing paper displaying a map of the mine and operating precautions had been pasted upon the rugged wall, and in the middle of the room was a small square table, next to which two old sofas had been placed. Excessive moisture had completely eroded the patent leather of the sofas.

Lu Feng was conversing with the boy.

The boy's name was Xi Bei, and according to him, when the unprecedented calamity had approached, the mine caved in. But because the radiation did not penetrate through the ground, some of the people within

managed to survive and continued until now. They would go to the ruins of nearby small towns to gather daily necessities and would also be killed and devoured by the monsters outside. His mother gave birth to only him, and slowly, gradually, out of the original dozens of people, only he and his grandfather as well as a few older uncles were left.

"I just knew that there was no way everyone would have died. They must have built new homes somewhere, but we couldn't find you people. In the past, my grandfather said that when we found another exit and left the mine, the weather had changed and there was not a single living person."

"The radio couldn't receive any signals, there were monsters everywhere outside, and we couldn't go out. We could only stay here, but we knew there still must have been other people." Xi Bei's voice trembled with a thread of excitement, and from a cubbyhole in the wall he took out a few slim and worn-out books.

"Two years ago, we found a car outside. In addition to a dead person, these were inside it, so I knew there were still people outside. I've… always been waiting for you to come. Our… our fellow people must have always been searching in order to rescue us." He looked at Lu Feng, eyes shining, full of hope.

In a low voice, Lu Feng said, "The base welcomes you."

On the other hand, An Zhe reached out. Within that stack of slim volumes, the topmost one's cover was illuminated by the dim gas lamp. Its title was Base Monthly. The words jogged the scraps of memories stored in his head. This was a pamphlet that the base's Cultural Department distributed to the people.

In this manner, the pamphlet was produced by the distant human base, then taken along with pornographic novels and weapon handbooks by mercenaries or soldiers for a ride in an armored vehicle departing from the base. After a long journey, it had been abandoned forever in the wilderness. And after that, the survivors of the Desert Age took it out of the vehicle

wreckage and passed it around day after day in the mine. They knew it represented distant human homes.

The title page, already yellowed, had the words "May we have a bright future" written in small font. After a turn of the page, the table of contents appeared.

The hand An Zhe was turning the pages with suddenly trembled, and his gaze stopped at a particular line in the table of contents consisting of two words that could be no simpler.

"Winter Day."

The ellipses extended all the way to the right edge of the paper, and at the end were two other words representing the writer's name.

An Ze.

An Zhe's breathing stopped for a brief moment. Then he glimpsed in his peripheral vision the line underneath "Winter Day," an essay titled "A Day in 2059."

2059 was a distant time in history, so this title indicated that it was a sophisticated historical essay.

Its writer was named Poet.

These two names silently lay side by side on the page.

An Zhe's fingers landed on the paper. His fingers had once held An Ze's shoulder in that vine-filled cave and once been squeezed by Poet in a pitch-black car. Now they brushed over the two men's names, and their figures once again became vivid in An Zhe's mind. He flipped to that page—those two side-by-side pages. "Winter Day" was a short poem written about the snowflakes falling upon the supply depot square that winter. An Ze had said that the fallen snow was as soft as the wings of snow-white doves.

An Zhe was able to recall all of the details in An Ze's voice, and it was like he was hearing An Ze personally describe it to him. In that fleeting moment, An Ze seemed to come back to life, and Poet likewise stood before

him with a smile, insisting on telling An Zhe the base's history. This world still contained the records they left behind.

An Zhe's vision went blurry. Clearly he had not thought of the two of them for a very long time already, but their figures nevertheless appeared vividly before him, as though they had met only yesterday.

In this manner, he reunited with them again, just like how this boy named Xi Bei suddenly encountered the visitors from the human base.

"Originally there were also two uncles here, but they went out to find things to eat. It's been more than a day and they haven't come back. I think…" Xi Bei hung his head. "I think… they may not be able to come back."

"My apologies," Lu Feng said. "I've arrived late."

"Not at all!" Xi Bei shook his head vigorously, then gave Lu Feng an awkward, close-lipped smile. His voice was a bit raspy as he said, "There are monsters everywhere outside, so it must have been very difficult for you too. Just the fact that you've come makes me very… very grateful already. In this world, there are still other humans, and we still have a home. It's… it's great."

The glow of the gas lamp reflected off of his black pupils, where bright sparks danced in excitement. The sparks combined with the subtle expression on Xi Bei's face, presenting a pure joy mingled with sorrow.

An Zhe silently looked at Xi Bei's face and knew that it was an emotion he would never understand. He lowered his head. On the magazine's yellowing pages, An Ze's voice and face appeared before him once again.

His eyes misted over. Merely a few hours ago, he had still been internally criticizing the stubborn efforts the humans were making to retain their will and imagining that the day Lu Feng also changed into a xenogenic, he wouldn't dislike him. But at this very moment, the idea wavered slightly.

Humans were humans after all, he thought.

He knew that the base had no medicine, and he knew that humankind had reached its end.

But they were also truly everlasting.

35

“LU FENG PICKED HIM UP.”

"LAST MONTH, one of my… uncles was bitten by a monster outside and died. Then a few days ago, another uncle went out to look for supplies. Over those few days, the temperature shot up, and there was a sandstorm. He hasn't come back either. And after that were the two uncles I just mentioned." Xi Bei's fingers scratched at the paint curling off the table, and he slowly said, "There's only me and my grandfather left, but his illness is getting worse and worse. He used to be able to talk to me, but these days, his mind is not clear."

"Sometimes he'll cry out in pain, and sometimes he'll say things that I don't understand." Xi Bei looked at Lu Feng with an earnest gaze. "Can you cure him?"

Lu Feng said, "Back at the base, perhaps they can find out the illness's cause."

He did not make the guarantee that they would "definitely be able to cure him." An Zhe looked down at the words on the Base Monthly pamphlet. This page bore an obituary saying that a certain gentleman who had always been contributing to Base Monthly had passed away from illness and that the serialized novel Mission was thus discontinued.

Within the base—or at least in the Outer City—very few could live to fifty or sixty. What people fortunate enough to enter old age faced were various illnesses that came in quick succession. The artificial magnetic field

was weaker than the original geomagnetic field, so humans still received the effects of slight radiation exposure. Thus, the incidences of genetic diseases—primarily cancer—was still very high, taking away more than half of the elderly. Moreover, the lifestyle of licking blood off a knife's edge in the wilderness would make the survivors live in endless stress reactions and psychological trauma, which were also chronic diseases that cannot be wiped out.

"Thank… thank you," Xi Bei said. "My grandfather raised me, and it was he who taught me to read. He was also the one who had always been repairing our generators. Everyone said that there were no other people in the world, and it was Grandfather who always had us wait. He said that the aurora in the sky meant that there were still human organizations somewhere out there."

Lu Feng asked, "Was he this place's engineer?"

"Yes," Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng narrowed his eyes slightly.

He asked, "Why did he know that the aurora represented human organizations?"

After some thought, Xi Bei explained, "This place is a magnetite mine, and Grandfather was an engineer in this respect. He said… said that his own teacher used to work at some research institute and that the research institute had always been studying the magnetic poles. Grandfather's teacher told him that the cause of this calamity was a problem with the magnetic poles, but the research institute was trying hard to find a way to solve it."

"The Highland Research Institute," Lu Feng said flatly. "The base of the research on the artificial magnetic poles."

Xi Bei nodded. "I think that was its name."

"We have temporarily lost contact with the base," Lu Feng said, not continuing the previous conversation topic. "When communications are

restored, we will take both of you back with us."

Xi Bei forcefully nodded. "Thank you."

After that, they stayed in the mine. When communications would be restored was a mystery, so Xi Bei gave them a rough understanding of the mine's structure.

The place they were currently located at was the core area. When the great calamity had not yet occurred, it was the temporary rest area for the miners and engineers. There were rooms for people to live in, basic living facilities, and some mining machinery that had been left behind, including generators and many tools. Because it was deep underground and surrounded by incomparably hard minerals, so long as the cave entrance was protected, this place would be a self-contained safety zone.

Outside the core area were several deep mine shafts, all products of the people who came before, that extended along the ore veins.

"Although it's dark, there are no monsters inside," Xi Bei said. "You can rest easy."

At noon, Xi Bei went to prepare food. An Zhe was curious about their kitchen, but he still did not know Xi Bei well, so he did not dare to recklessly intrude on other people's territory. Instead, he found something else to do.

Mushrooms liked water, and humans also needed to drink water. Water was something very important, sometimes even more important than food, so in order to gather enough water, the people inside the mine went to great lengths.

Whenever it rained outside, it was time to accumulate stored water. A large amount of rainwater could be collected each time, after which it would be purified with alum powder and stored in a large cement bucket. But the weather was unpredictable after all. Nobody knew when the next rain would come, so over the years, the people living in this place had also created a water collection system. Along the largest and deepest mine, they

had carved out complicated lines all over the stone walls. The interior of the mine was extremely damp, and due to the temperature difference between day and night, fine droplets of water would condense on the walls in great numbers. Once the droplets reached a certain weight, they would roll down, then slowly accumulate along the man-made carved lines, and land drop by drop in the water collection bottle at the very bottom. After the hundreds of plastic water collection bottles were filled, there could be close to a hundred liters altogether.

According to Xi Bei, the most recent lot of water collection bottles were almost full and could now be gathered.

Thus, An Zhe and Lu Feng, each bringing a plastic water bucket and a gas lamp for illumination, walked into the main path of the mine to help Xi Bei retrieve the water.

An Zhe first picked up the plastic bottle at the entrance and poured the water into the bucket, then put it back down and continued walking forward in search of the next one.

He noticed that Lu Feng hadn't moved, so he turned around to look.

This man was leaning against a stone wall, looking at him in a composed manner. Only after An Zhe gave him a look did he take a few steps forward and gather water with him. An Zhe was baffled by his attitude, but the Colonel's subsequent actions were all very earnest, so he did not ask.

The mine extended deep underground, with metal tracks laid down in the middle. He and Lu Feng each took one side, both focusing on filling their own buckets.

This was a magnetite mine, rough all around and covered with dig marks. The main part was a wet dark gray hue, and the glow of the gas lamp had dimmed in the damp environment, turning the surroundings foggy.

Humans may not like this sort of environment, but the water vapor made An Zhe feel very comfortable. He even felt his spore do a relaxed roll inside himself, which amused him. With his eyes slightly curved, he gently gave his stomach a rub as a response to the spore—putting the spore in this place made him feel safe.

As he traveled along the mining track, the amount of water in his bucket continued to increase, and once he finally walked to the end of the water collection system, the water-filled plastic bucket had become the heaviest thing in the world.

After the last bottle of water had been poured in, An Zhe turned around with difficulty, water bucket in hand.

In front of him was a long, dark cave, and the place he had started from had turned into a point of light as feeble as a spark.

The water bucket in his hand was so heavy, and the road was so long. He had to walk back, but he was already on the verge of being unable to carry it. To haul the bucket back was practically an impossible task.

An Zhe was suddenly dumbstruck.

Footsteps rang out in the cave, for Lu Feng had walked over to his side.

The Colonel asked, "You aren't walking anymore?"

There was a lilt at the end of his words, seemingly containing a mocking laugh.

Silently, An Zhe looked at the end of the mine and felt his IQ being extinguished little by little.

Lu Feng cast him a glance and said dryly, "If you had walked here first and then started filling it with water—"

An Zhe said nothing. He was not in great shape.

If he had come here first with an empty bucket, then collected water as he walked back, he would have only needed to make one trip with the water bucket. Whereas right now—not only had he carried the increasingly heavy water bucket all the way here, he also needed to carry it back.

He also finally knew why Lu Feng did not move after seeing his actions.

This man, this man—

This man clearly predicted the aftermath from the very beginning but chose to watch him carry on as though nothing was happening.

An Zhe decided to get angry. He was a self-respecting mushroom, so with the incomparably weighty water bucket in hand, he started walking back and even strove to speed up his pace.

But Lu Feng had long legs and thus could effortlessly keep up with him. After walking more than ten steps, this man even reached out and stopped An Zhe with a hand on his shoulder.

"Look over there," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe looked to the side.

There was a cart two square meters in size parked on the metal track containing a few chunks of ore. It was clearly a mine cart used to transport rocks.

The weight in his hand suddenly lightened. Lu Feng had taken his water bucket and put it in the cart, then put his own in the cart as well.

Just as An Zhe thought that the Colonel was merely intending to save his energy with the help of this means of transportation, he heard him say flatly, "You get on too."

An Zhe looked at the mine cart, somewhat hesitant. He felt that the expression in Lu Feng's eyes contained some interest, as though he wished to play some strange games.

In the end, because he neither obeyed nor refused, Lu Feng picked him up and put him in the cart.

The inside of the mine cart was very spacious. With his back toward Lu Feng, An Zhe sat down, arms wrapped around his knees. Lu Feng hung the gas lamp at the front end of the cart. The small mine cart was pushed

forward slowly along the track, and the trundling of its wheels echoed gently in the mine.

Surrounded by mountain walls, this place was isolated from the world, and there were no lurking dangers. The gas lamp's yellow light softly illuminated a small portion of the area in front, and sometimes, specks of fluorescence glinted within the ores. It was like a place that would appear in human fairy tales.

An Zhe looked forward and reclined against the back side of the cart, feeling relaxed. It was a mushroom's natural character to relax and dislike moving, so he did not dislike being pushed along. And although he could not see Lu Feng, he somehow felt that the man was currently very happy as well. A mushroom's joy was obviously based on idleness, but as for what the Colonel's joy was based on, he really did not understand.

As he looked forward, he internally gave a scornful snort.

Unexpectedly, lunch was mushroom soup.

Xi Bei said that he had planted them in the mine himself, so they were clean. Oyster mushrooms grew quickly, and the remainder was still sufficient for several more days.

Upon hearing Xi Bei's words, An Zhe silently shrank into a corner. Xi Bei looked so gentle and friendly, An Zhe did not expect him to also be a mushroom-killing murderer.

But he had no choice but to become a mushroom-eating accomplice.

Before they began eating, An Zhe noticed Lu Feng cast a look toward him, and he believed the Colonel must have remembered that bowl of mushroom soup he could not drink before leaving the base. It seemed to be a type of regret, and humans did not like having regrets. Eating it today could be considered making up for before.

After the meal, Xi Bei showed them the food reserves. There wasn't much—some mushrooms, a few strips of air-dried meat, and a packet of salt.

"The meat was stored in the past," Xi Bei said. "The pitfall traps can catch some small monsters. They say that if you eat the ones that look too strange, you'll get infected. Only the ones that aren't too strange can be eaten like the animals in the past."

Lu Feng said, "Monsters with low mutation levels can be consumed once twenty-four hours have passed since their deaths."

"Then those uncles were more or less correct," Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng asked him, "What kind of monsters are here?"

"Birds, lots of lizards, and big rats," Xi Bei said. "Sometimes there are bugs, the spidery kind. We eat quite a lot of rats."

"But after the sandstorm, I've rarely seen them. I spotted two especially ugly things, though." At that point, Xi Bei's complexion paled slightly. "They were especially big. I was scared they'd notice me, so I only looked at them through a telescope. I've never seen those kinds of things before. Do you know what they are?"

"This place ought to be the Eastern Hills. The original degree of pollution was not high," Lu Feng said. "But there was an accident with the magnetic field five days ago, which produced secondary mutations, and hybrid-class monsters started appearing."

"… Huh?" Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng's voice was slightly grim. "Through the food chain, the original small monsters aggregated into large hybrid monsters."

Xi Bei's complexion paled a little more.

As An Zhe listened to Lu Feng speak, he could imagine how the monsters fought against each other, their numbers decreasing but their mutation levels skyrocketing. Perhaps what was even more terrifying was

that the same thing was happening all over the world, and each day was becoming more chaotic than the previous one.

Lu Feng looked at Xi Bei. The combination of his eye shape and color formed a keen and ice-cold outline. Xi Bei, clearly still unused to meeting the Colonel's eyes, picked off another piece of paint from the table.

Lu Feng asked, "Has anyone ever mutated within the caves?"

"Yes. An uncle was bitten by a monster, and then he bit others."

"How was it dealt with?"

"They were released."

The communications were still blocked, but the Colonel carried out his duties. In the afternoon, Lu Feng borrowed paper and a pen from Xi Bei and wrote down simple notes on their situation.

Nighttime was rest time. In the entire mine, there was only one usable generator, and the routes were damp and aging. In the entire mine, there remained only one empty room with electricity, so the two of them lived in there.

After bathing, An Zhe rubbed his hair dry and played with bits of magnetite. In this mine, magnetite could be found everywhere.

With one piece in each hand, he faced the same poles of the magnetite pieces toward each other, wishing to push them together. There was clearly only air between these two black pieces of magnetite, but no matter how much strength he used, he could not put them close together. It was like there was an invisible force in the middle pushing them outward.

He frowned, not knowing why it would be this way. He could not understand a lot of human knowledge, just like how humans could not understand a lot of this world's knowledge. But he still stubbornly wished to put them together. He felt that so long as there was enough strength, there would not be anything that could not get close to something else.

With the sound of footsteps, Lu Feng entered the room. His coat, which An Zhe had washed, was now drying in a ventilated spot. Looking up, An

Zhe saw that the Colonel's upper body was clad only in the military's standard black undershirt, revealing the graceful and sleek lines of his shoulder and arm muscles. The legs of his pants were tucked into his black boots, which made his figure seem even more imposing and beautiful. His offhandedly toweled hair was in slight disarray, and crystalline droplets of water hung from the stray locks over his forehead.

An Zhe looked at him. Without the Arbiter's uniform and without the badge, Lu Feng seemed to only be a promising and powerful young officer. Even though his visage was as cold as ever and the temperature of his chilly green eyes had not risen by any substantial degree, An Zhe had the feeling he was much more relaxed. He suddenly remembered that, according to how human age was counted, one's twenties were clearly when everything had just begun.

A certain person in his twenties was fiddling with the communicator, head bowed, but the communicator only repeated again and again, "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere…"

After turning off the communicator and putting it on the table, Lu Feng sat down next to An Zhe.

No matter what An Zhe did, he could not put the same poles of the two pieces of magnetite together. He looked at Lu Feng.

"It's mutual repulsion," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe frowned.

Lu Feng took the two pieces out of his hands. Because opposite poles attracted, with a change in orientation, the two pieces of magnetite snapped together perfectly. Then Lu Feng tossed them aside.

An Zhe picked them back up and once again played with them, but no matter how many times he tried, the results were the same. Between two of the same poles was an insurmountable resistance, and they could never be put together. On the other hand, the two opposite poles had an unimaginable

attractive force. So long as they came even a little close to each other, they would automatically break free of his fingers and fly toward each other.

An Zhe asked, "What's in between them?"

He was a mushroom, and An Ze had never taken physics class before, so their combined knowledge could not explain this phenomenon.

Lu Feng said, "Magnetic fields."

An Zhe asked, "Is it the same as the artificial magnetic field?"

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe asked, "Can it not be seen?"

"No, it can't."

"Why not?"

Lu Feng stuffed him underneath the quilt. "Many things can't be seen."

"Oh," An Zhe said. It was a little warm under the quilt, so he uncovered his arms and shoulders.

Lu Feng looked at the collar of his soft white T-shirt, where a blue bruise was showing. Then he reached out and pulled the collar down.

Beneath the collar, upon the skin that was originally a smooth and flawless milky white, blue-purple bruises were everywhere and evenly spaced out, so evenly that one could not find which particular bruise was the source.

Saying nothing, An Zhe pried Lu Feng's hand off and silently pulled his collar back into place.

Lu Feng's gaze still lingered there. Of course he recognized this kind of mark. When the base approached serious criminals whom they needed to extort confessions from via torture, they would use high-intensity electrocution. Nobody could get through it without confessing. The sequelae left by electrocution were varied, ranging from physical to psychological. Marks on the skin were but one of them, and still more people would never be able to cast off this painful nightmare in their entire lives.

But after An Zhe wrapped himself tightly in the quilt, he only dropped his eyelashes a little and said quietly, "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Looking at his peaceful expression, Lu Feng sometimes wanted very much to bully him and sometimes wanted to treat him well.

Then he saw An Zhe wriggle toward the inner side of the bed, making room for him to lie down.

The bed was not big. After Lu Feng lay down on his side, they were very close to each other. An Zhe also spotted a wound on his arm that seemed like it had come from being struck by a blunt instrument, but that wasn't all, for there were faintly visible bruises and scratches on his shoulder as well.

He reached out to touch the longest one, but halfway there, afraid of hurting the Colonel, he retracted his hand and docilely shrank back into the quilt.

The expression in the Colonel's eyes seemed gentle. "Sleep."

"Mm," An Zhe said, then closed his eyes.

His eyelashes cast faint shadows in the light, giving his expression a softer and quieter cast. He was also completely relaxed, something Lu Feng was very easily able to recognize. This little xenogenic seemed certain that Lu Feng would not hurt him—even after his body was covered with electrocution marks.

This was not the first time Lu Feng felt puzzled by his actions. When they had just met, on that disorderly night when he had left the city gates and had nowhere to go, An Zhe had also said to him, unguarded, "you can stay with me." At that time, he had thought either that this boy had hidden motives or that he was as pure as his exterior, as though he didn't know people did not often invite strangers to stay overnight.

Having had these thoughts, he voiced them as well.

"… You aren't afraid of me?"

At that question, An Zhe slowly opened his eyes. Beneath the dim glow of the gas lamp, his eyes seemed to be covered with a layer of soft, beautiful mist.

In this brief span, he seemed to have almost fallen asleep. Voice muffled, he asked, "Why would I be?"

Lu Feng said nothing. He lifted his upper body and looked down at An Zhe, gaze heavy, while his other hand picked up the gun that had been placed next to the pillow. Its ice-cold muzzle briefly touched An Zhe's cheek.

An Zhe gave him a clear-eyed look and frowned slightly. Seemingly angry again, he pushed aside the barrel of the gun, then rolled over to face the other way, yanking the quilt away with that movement.

Lu Feng looked at his slender neck along with his thin shoulders and back that rose and fell slightly in time with his breathing. A person like this seemed both very easy to hurt and very easy to protect. After a long while, he turned off the light and lay back down.

A slight weight settled over Lu Feng as An Zhe pulled back over him the part of the quilt he had yanked away earlier.

Like a dragonfly's tail tapping the calm surface of a lake on a summer night.

What the ripples disturbed was not only the previously calm water.

In the silence, it was unclear if Lu Feng was driven by some emotion or it was just a subconscious action when he hugged An Zhe from behind. Lu Feng's arm pressed down against An Zhe's, and An Zhe stirred. He had planned to move his arm downward but there was nowhere he could put it, so he moved it back up a little and rested his fingers on Lu Feng's forearm, just like how he used to curl his hyphae around nearby rocks or tree trunks.

Lu Feng felt his movement.

Very softly, An Zhe asked, "Aren't you afraid I'll infect you?”

Lu Feng did not answer An Zhe, just as An Zhe did not answer him earlier.

Between an Arbiter trusting a xenogenic or a xenogenic trusting an Arbiter, it was hard to say which was more absurd—no matter what reason they had. Perhaps the day they met was the beginning of the world's most absurd story.

But in the darkness, neither of them could clearly see the other's face. In this place that was isolated from the world, in this moment that nobody knew of, it seemed as though regardless of what one did, it would not matter. Everything would be forgotten, and everything would be tacitly agreed to.

While listening to An Zhe's soft breathing, Lu Feng closed his eyes.

36

“YOU TWO HAVE A GREAT RELATIONSHIP.”

AN ZHE HAD A DREAM.

The pitter-pattering sound of rain.

Water droplets struck wide leaves, flowed down along crisscrossing leaf veins, and fell from the edges to land in the shrubbery, then trickled down the roots of old trees and seeped into the damp soil. It was a wet rainy season, a sight he seemed to have experienced many times before. His memories started from there, when the entire world was composed of rain.

He floated down from a mushroom's cap and, before the rain began to fall, was borne to the soil by the wind. He seemed to have been sleeping all the way up until he smelled the damp water vapor after the rain.

Everything was out of his control. In the moist soil, the hyphae stretched out, grew long, split, extended outward, and aggregated. He grew from a spore smaller than a speck of sand into a mass of hyphae, then drew out a stem and grew a cap.

Everything followed a clear and orderly pattern. Unlike humans, mushrooms did not need to pass down teachings from generation to generation. He did not have the slightest recollection of the mushroom that had produced him, but he clearly knew what he needed to obtain from the soil, as though this was his own experience. He also knew in what season he ought to be born, what he ought to do, and in what season he ought to die. His life's mission was to produce a spore.

Then he once again grew and died, while his spore continued to grow. Amidst the timeless sound of rain, countless spores drifted down in turn.

In that manner, the soft rainfall sounded in his ears. All around him, and within his body, mind, and memories, it was omnipresent, as though hastening the occurrence of something that was about to happen. In its wake came the waves that came from distant skies. Infinite emptiness, infinite terror—until his eyes flew open.

The quartz clock hanging on the wall had ticked to nine o'clock. There was nobody next to him, and he was securely wrapped in the quilt. But the feeling of being held in Lu Feng's arms seemed to still remain. The heat lingered on his skin, burning him bit by bit. Lu Feng had originally been holding him around the upper body, somewhere below his shoulders. In the middle of the night, though, An Zhe had started feeling discomfort in his arms from the weight and pulled them out. The man's arm had thus shifted downward a bit and settled on his waist, his palm just happening to lie flat against An Zhe's abdomen.

When he was being held in Lu Feng's arms, it was like he could isolate himself from all the dangers outside. He felt very safe, but this man himself was also the greatest danger. An Zhe could no longer remember what kind of mood he was in before he fell back asleep.

An Zhe looked at everything in front of him, his mind utterly blank. He wiggled his fingers. Softness permeated even the nooks and crannies of his bones. As though he had taken too long of an afternoon nap, he had no strength all over.

The surrounding air was so damp, just like right after a bout of rain.

He thought back to that strange yet seemingly prophetic dream, then sat up from the bed and held out his hand. Taking the spore from his stomach was too cruel of an act. Only a certain officer named Lu would do so. He controlled the movement of the spore within his body. Three minutes later,

a mass of white hyphae stretched out, appearing upon his right palm while clustered around his spore.

When he had placed it in his body, it was a little spore only the size of half of a palm, but now it was the same size as his fist.

He carefully scrutinized it by the glow of the gas lamp. At the ends of the spore's hyphae were minute antler-like bifurcations, and with its white and transparent luster, it was like a snowflake. Its shape had begun to change.

He touched it with his left hand, and it reached out with its hyphae to affectionately wrap around his fingers. He could feel its fresh and flourishing life; it was close to maturity.

He did not know precisely when the spore would reach maturity, but it would not be long.

Their hyphae would no longer be intertwined. It would become a mushroom capable of surviving independently. The moment it matured, it would automatically leave him, just like when he had been blown down by the wind.

Planting its spores was a mushroom's instinct. Where did he want to plant it? Would it grow up in the distant future? An Zhe did not know. He only felt the faint wistfulness that came before a parting. It seemed that all tangible things in the world would eventually be separated.

Just then, there was the sound of movement in the passageway. His spore first pricked up its hyphae, seemingly listening to the sound, then spiritedly rolled toward the sound's source like the pole of one piece of magnetite leaping toward another pole. An Zhe brought his hands together, clasping it tightly, and just barely managed to recall the traitorous little thing back to his own body before Lu Feng entered.

Standing at the doorway, Lu Feng raised his eyebrows at An Zhe.

"Get up," he said.

An Zhe obediently got out of bed and went to eat. They spent the following few days in the same manner, with An Zhe helping Xi Bei cook and tidy up the mine. Lu Feng frequently went outside. Each time, An Zhe worried he wouldn't be able to come back, but each time, the Colonel was unexpectedly safe and sound. Sometimes, he would even bring back a small bird and toss it to them for roasting.

More often, they stayed in the cave with nothing to do. An Zhe had finished reading all of the books, and at the Colonel's request, he read out loud to him a romance novel and an entire weapons handbook—the man could not be bothered to flip through them himself.

Finally, they began to play board games with small stones. They were all very simple games such as five-in-a-row or airplane chess. Lu Feng first taught him, and then they played together. An Zhe lost more often than he won, and he secretly suspected that those few wins were from the Colonel secretly throwing the game because every time he won, a hint of a smile would appear in Lu Feng's eyes.

When they were eating, Xi Bei said, "You two have a great relationship. There used to be people who would fall in love in the caves as well, and Grandfather would be the witness for their marriages," he sighed softly, putting down his chopsticks. "I also want to fall in love, but there are no other people left here."

Lu Feng said nothing. An Zhe comforted Xi Bei, saying, "There are people at the base."

Although there were only eight thousand of them.

Seemingly comforted, Xi Bei spiritedly picked his chopsticks back up.

Seven days later, communications had still not been restored, and Xi Bei told them the unfortunate news that their stores of food were no longer enough for two days' worth. They had to go to the city ruins that were thousands of meters away to search for supplies.

So they left some dried food for Grandfather and put the remaining mushrooms and dried meat in their backpacks along with several bottles of water. Xi Bei brought out a small alcohol burner from the kitchen. Before the people of the mine died out, they often went to the city to search for supplies, so they were well equipped.

"We made a dirt road, so we could get there by bicycle." Xi Bei's tone of voice was slightly despondent. "Now it's turned into sand, so bicycling is impossible."

Thus, before An Zhe left, he longingly looked at the bicycles piled in a corner. He had never seen bicycles before.

Lu Feng rested his elbow on An Zhe's shoulder and said languidly, "I'll take you to ride them after we get back."

Just as they had prepared everything, when they were getting ready to open the lid at the top of the cave, heavy and sluggish footsteps came from the depths of the mine.

An Zhe turned back. In the dim lighting, a withered old man approached from around the corner while using the wall for support. His hair was grizzled and unkempt, and the corners of his mouth trembled constantly like the flame of a pale candle flickering in the wind.

Xi Bei walked forward. "… Grandfather?"

The old man stared at him with cloudy eyes, devoid of expression and not seeming to recognize him. He opened his mouth, saying, "I'll go too."

Xi Bei hugged the old man by the shoulders. "You can just stay here. We'll be back in a day or two, and we'll bring food back with us."

In the same hoarse voice, the old man said, "I'll go too."

No matter how Xi Bei tried to dissuade him, he only had that sentence to say. Because of this persistence, his dull face unexpectedly showed an unusual lucidity.

Left with no other choice, Xi Bei turned to Lu Feng with a pleading gaze.

Lu Feng examined the old man for a long time before saying, "Let's bring him."

Xi Bei gave his assent and helped the old man out—his tottering gait was unsteady, and anyone who looked at him would know that this elderly life was drawing near to its end.

At the cave mouth, Lu Feng said, "I'll take him."

Xi Bei shook his head. After picking up his grandfather on his back, he said, "Grandfather is very light."

An Zhe looked at the old man's withered body. Illness had already consumed his body to the point where only a loose skeleton remained.

They arrived aboveground where it was daylight, the sun shining down on them. An Zhe squinted, getting accustomed to it only after some time had passed.

He looked at Grandfather being propped up on Xi Bei's back, eyes closed. His face was covered with the kind of brown spots that would appear in a human's old age, but in the sunlight, his expression was very peaceful.

His mouth moved as he spoke a single sentence.

"People live on the ground."

This was the only thing An Zhe heard from Grandfather over the past few days that didn't sound like gibberish.

He looked up at the pale gray sky. At the moment, faint ribbons of pale green were drifting across the sky. Even though it was not nighttime, it was possible to see the aurora, unlike before.

Lu Feng said, "The magnetic field's frequency has been adjusted."

An Zhe nodded. He did not know the meaning of that sentence, but so long as the magnetic field was still fine, then everything was fine.

Upon the sand, their footsteps were sometimes deep and sometimes shallow. As they crossed the vast wasteland, it was like they were the only living things. The wind blew from an unknown distance. Whether it was

over ten thousand years or a hundred million years, it blew in this manner. The creatures walking on the ground would be renewed and replaced, with some dying and some being newly born, but the wind would not change. When it blew into the crevices in the rock, a strange and drawn-out noise that resembled wailing would sound in the wasteland.

Amidst this distant wailing, An Zhe spontaneously latched onto the hem of Lu Feng's sleeve and walked with him.

Lu Feng gave him a flat look. "Shall I carry you on my back?"

An Zhe shook his head. He could walk on his own.

Saying nothing, Lu Feng once again looked forward.

After walking for another stretch, An Zhe had become tired from latching on, and his arm was a little sore. Over the past few days, as his spore gradually matured, his physical strength seemed to worsen. He wanted to let go but also did not really want to let go.

Lu Feng flexed his wrist, and An Zhe understood his meaning. He had annoyed the Colonel with his hold, so he obediently let go.

Then his hand was grasped by the Colonel's.

On the road, they spotted the wreckage of a plane. The plane's shape was identical to that of Lu Feng's plane. An Zhe roughly estimated the direction. This plane should be the one before Lu Feng's crash. He had witnessed its fall.

After three or four planes crashed in succession, he never again saw the base's planes appear in the sky. Most likely the base had also noticed this strange change and no longer dispatched its fighter planes.

But this plane's condition was better than that of Lu Feng's. It hadn't exploded, so apart from the damage to its appearance, everything else was well preserved.

Lu Feng walked over and detached the plane's black box. After hesitating briefly, he climbed through the cracked plane cabin door. There were bite marks at the edges.

Monsters had eaten the pilot's body. The bloodstained clothes had dried, and the picked-clean bones lay scattered about in the cockpit. The skull had tumbled underneath the console, only half of it remaining and with sharp teeth marks along the edge.

An Zhe climbed in with him. For a moment, Lu Feng wanted him to leave so that he wouldn't be frightened by this hideous sight, but then he saw An Zhe's calm gaze and realized that he would not feel fear because of human remains.

Below the console was a flight manual lying face down. The flight manual was a pilot's reference book, containing records of basic operation steps, the purposes of instruments and how to use them, and the solutions to various extraordinary circumstances.

Lu Feng pulled the flight manual over to himself. An unknown change had occurred to the manual. The black writing had deeply, deeply seeped into the paper. The color diffused outward as fine black tentacles, making the printed characters all over the pages warp and twist strangely, resembling some sort of evil symbols.

An Zhe looked at the paper as well and struggled to recognize the words. What this page talked about were the various possible kinds of engine breakdowns.

Thus, he knew that this plane crash had occurred because of an engine breakdown, and until the very moment the plane crashed, the pilot had been searching the manual for possible solutions.

Then—at that moment, the plane crashed, the manual fell, and the people died.

After Lu Feng carried An Zhe down from the plane's accommodation ladder and put him on the ground, An Zhe heard Lu Feng say, "The plane I

was in also crashed because of an engine breakdown."

An Zhe frowned.

Lu Feng continued, "But problems occurred with the other parts as well."

"Was it because there were problems when they were made?" An Zhe asked.

"The fleet of PJ fighter planes has already carried out many flight missions, and they had also been serviced prior to takeoff." Lu Feng said.

They continued walking. Xi Bei and Grandfather were waiting up ahead for them.

An Zhe could not understand the reason for the plane breakdowns. He asked, "Then why?"

"I don't know." The Colonel very seldom spoke these three words.

As though he recalled something, he said flatly, "An engine breakdown occurred when the PL1109 was landing as well, but it still descended safely."

The PL1109 was the base's most advanced fighter plane. What Lu Feng meant was that there was now the risk of accidents occurring with all planes. Not long ago, when he had left the human base and was looking back at the Main City, he had also seen the PL1109's slowly descending silhouette. It turned out that at that time, Lu Feng had already made a trip along the edge of life and death.

"Then…" An Zhe said in a small voice, "will you not ride planes anymore?"

Saying nothing, Lu Feng simply ruffled his hair.

After meeting back up with Xi Bei, they gave a simple rundown of the situation there and continued walking forward.

Within their lines of sight, everything was wasteland.

Xi Bei looked around. "There really are fewer monsters now. There used to be quite a lot before."

An Zhe knew what these words meant. Whether big or small, many creatures had died and become nothing but parts for and of the hybrid-class monsters. Because the total number of monsters decreased, this place seemed much safer. But each monster by itself was more dangerous.

But all of these changes were completed in less than a couple of weeks, and the small and weak monsters were wiped out. The process was still too fast. An Zhe thought back to the monster that was desperately greedy to consume genes. Its actions truly seemed overly hasty.

In truth, there were similar images within his memories. He remembered the late autumns in the Abyss.

In the winter, the Abyss would become wet and cold. After a snowfall, there would be frost everywhere on the ground and the trees. Many monsters would no longer come out and move about. Instead, they would search for warm caves to hide in. In order to live through an entire winter, they would madly fight each other, desperately consume more flesh and blood to store nutrition for the winter, or drag the carcasses of their enemies into their caves to serve as food reserves. The month before winter arrived was the Abyss's most dangerous and most bloody time.

Now, the same kind of slaughter was happening outside as well.

This stretch of road was not long. The entire way, they were sufficiently cautious, choosing hidden routes to travel over. Perhaps also because of luck, they did not encounter any terrifying hybrid-class monsters.

They had set out at eight o'clock. At half past nine in the morning, a city half-buried by the wind and sand appeared in front of them.

It was very large. When they got closer, they could not see the end of it at a glance. Amidst the unbroken succession of buildings, they could faintly see the vestiges of the road. Unlike the standardized buildings of the Northern Base, they were scattered about and devoid of any patterns. Tall and short buildings stood together, and round and rectangular buildings had been placed at random. The roads twisted and turned, and a dark red tower

stood in the center of the city. Half of the overpass had collapsed, and thick profusions of vines hung from it as it lay across the middle of the road up ahead. There were buildings in every color, but precisely because of the excessive number of colors, they became one in An Zhe's field of vision and gradually blurred into a misty gray.

An Zhe looked into the boundless distance. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have been able to imagine that the world still had this kind of complicated city within it. If he were one of its residents, getting lost would have been a common occurrence.

Dark clouds covered the sun, the sky was overcast, and a faint mist hung in the air.

"Come with me," Xi Bei said. "Those of us from the mine often came here to look for supplies, so we have a stronghold in the city. Actually, living in the city is fine as well. We're just afraid that there are monsters. Grandfather doesn't know why either. He just insists that the cave is the safest. In the past, three of the uncles thought that living in the cave was too difficult and came to live in the city. Afterward, there was no more news from them."

After following Xi Bei through the streets with numerous buildings, they arrived at a residential area where big gray buildings were crowded together. There was a public square in the distance, and in the center of the public square, a white sphere was faintly visible. In the silent city, apart from the wind passing through the buildings, there was only the sound of their footsteps.

Lu Feng was responsible for keeping watch over the surroundings. Because Xi Bei was carrying his grandfather, he had his head down the entire time. He said, "It's right past that public square. We'll get there very soon."

At that same moment, a coughing sound came from Grandfather's throat.

His vocal cords vibrated as he continually uttered a regular syllable. There was phlegm in his throat, so his voice was unclear. They could only just hear him say, "Gu…"

"Gu, gu…"

"What?" Xi Bei asked.

Lu Feng's footsteps came to an abrupt stop.

An Zhe looked at him, but saw that he was staring at the public square up ahead.

Then he spat out a curt word. "Run!"

There was no time to think. An Zhe felt a fierce yank on his arm, and he unconsciously followed Lu Feng in turning around and running toward the nearest building. Xi Bei did not know what had happened, but he swiftly followed while carrying his grandfather on his back.

The residential building was an architectural structure that An Zhe was familiar with. Right inside the corridor entrance, they were met by a pale, clothed skeleton. It was leaning against a corner and seemed to have fused into the pale wall. But he was in no position to look more closely. His body already lacked strength in the first place, so he fell a step behind when going up the stairs. Lu Feng simply picked him up and swiftly climbed the stairs. The staircase was very roomy, and each floor had three residences. At around the eighth floor, one door was wide open, and Lu Feng charged straight in with An Zhe. Xi Bei followed close behind, and as soon as he came in, Lu Feng shut the door. All of the furniture inside was covered with dust, and there was a skeleton lying on the living room sofa.

This was a place with three bedrooms and two living rooms, and it had windows on both the south and north sides. A part of the living room extended out from the building; it was a gigantic French window.

Lu Feng put An Zhe down. He was breathing hard from running too fast just now. An Zhe had never seen him in this state before.

But in the following moment—

He saw Xi Bei looking outside the French window, his face pallid and gaze unfocused.

He looked ahead.

White.

A white, spherical, half-a-story-tall monster was moving with some strange gait—almost floating, ghost-like footsteps—as it slowly approached. It was the thing in the distant public square that An Zhe had initially treated as a white decoration. It was a gigantic monster.

It came straight towards them. While it was still two streets away, An Zhe got a clear look at it. Beneath an indescribable body grew wriggling feet like those of an octopus or snail. The front half was responsible for walking, and the back half was dragged along. Its body—its nearly circular body—was covered with a translucent membrane that was a color somewhere between white and pale gray. Underneath the membrane, within its body were countless black or flesh-colored shapeless things or in other words organs. Densely concentrated tentacles or limbs, or other things, wriggled constantly.

The closer it came to the residential area, the more clearly visible the details on its body were. It was a hybridized shape completely beyond the scope of human understanding. Wherever its eyes were, they could not be found. Xi Bei stared straight at it, seemingly about to die from terror.

It came closer.

Everyone in the room held their breaths.

37

“BUT HE WAS NOT SUCH AN EVIL MUSHROOM.”

CROSSING the road that was covered with yellow sand, it came to the front of the community. Still a few hundred meters away, the soft thing's feet made rustling noises as they rubbed against the road.

On the surface of the slick, pale membrane, neither eyes, ears, nor antennae or breathing holes could be seen. How did it perceive the world? Hearing, sight, or sound waves? This would determine how they ought to escape.

Xi Bei asked, "What… what do we do?"

Lu Feng said nothing. He walked over to the window and pushed it, but the window seemed like it was frozen or rusted. With the first push, it unexpectedly didn't budge in the slightest. His arms tensed, and only after exerting some more force did the window let out an ugly-sounding screech of metal breaking and grinding. With difficulty, a small triangular gap was pushed open.

The jet-black muzzle of the gun stuck out through the gap, but what the Colonel aimed at was not the monster, but rather the opposite street.

There was a soft "bang." It was the sound of a silenced gunshot, unable to be heard from beyond ten meters away.

The bullet left a fleeting silhouette on his retinas, and then it was right in the window of a building next to the street.

The bullets he used when he went out into the field were different from the ordinary bullets he used when he tried humans. They were bullets of depleted uranium alloy, possessing the power to penetrate armor and crushing strength.

With a loud noise, a whole sheet of glass shattered and fell to the ground.

The monster's movements clearly paused.

Lu Feng lifted his gun again. In the direction he fired, broken glass crashed to the ground.

Sure enough, the monster had heard it, and the wriggling feet changed direction. It seemed to hesitantly stop for a moment, then move slowly toward the source of the noise, but it stopped again three minutes later, gave up its original direction, and continued to move toward the residential community where they were.

Xi Bei unconsciously stepped back, his face deathly pale. "It… It… Can you hit it?"

Lu Feng slightly pursed his thin lips, and he looked in that direction, his gaze cold and expression frighteningly calm.

Then he reached out, and there was a click as he detached the silencer.

He continually pressed down the trigger!

"Bang! Bang! Bang!”

A string of blasts exploded violently in the street around the monster! In the too-silent city, this sound was no different from deafening thunderclaps.

The monster once again lingered on the spot, wavering, but at the same time, a shrill cry suddenly came from the other end of the city.

Then a massive black shape launched into the air from that direction, and a massive hawk-like bird flew across the sky. It spread out its wingspan that was dozens of meters wide, and its gliding speed was even faster than bullets as it dove straight toward the similarly shaped white monster!

The monster emitted a high-pitched scream. Its white membrane split open, and countless soft bramble-like tentacles extended outward and wound around the eagle's beak like a tidal surge.

With a dull "pfft," the eagle's steel-armor-like wings pierced its body. At the pain, the monster's tentacles shrank back like they'd been electrocuted. The flying eagle took the opportunity to get away. After one strike, it immediately flapped its wings and flew up. Far outside the attack range of those plentiful dark gray tentacles, it circled once in the sky. The next moment, wrapped in the piercing shriek of the wind, it swooped down again. The sharp beak stabbed straight into the center of the white monster's body.

In an instant, white and flesh-colored liquids splashed everywhere. The razor teeth in its sharp beak bit down on something. The white monster's body was too enormous. As it madly writhed and struggled, the surrounding houses trembled and collapsed while the ground buzzed. In the gray human city, two unimaginably enormous monsters continued to fight—

An area of the ground hundreds of meters in circumference was stained with dark mucus. The battle concluded with the white monster destroyed beyond recognition, its internal organs dripping all over the ground. The eagle held its dripping-wet organs in its mouth. Without any reluctance, it turned and flew into the distance.

An Zhe breathed a soft sigh of relief. It was only then that he had understood Lu Feng's purpose in firing so many shots. There was not necessarily only one monster in this city. He had exposed its location with the sound of gunfire and attracted another monster.

Xi Bei asked, "How… How did you know that bird was there?"

Lu Feng pulled his gun back, reinstalled the silencer, and turned around, the series of actions fluid, neat, and well-practiced.

"I didn't," he said. "It was a gamble."

An Zhe looked in the direction where the eagle had disappeared. Under this current circumstance, flying-class monsters seemed to have shown unparalleled advantages.

Having escaped from the jaws of death, none of them said anything. In the silence, an elderly voice suddenly spoke up.

"It's almost time." Grandfather's voice was hoarse. "I've lived until age sixty. It's enough."

Lu Feng looked in the old man's direction.

He asked, "Time for what?"

The old man opened his mouth. As he stared at the distant sky, there was a hint of madness in his expression. "The time… the time of arrival."

"The arrival of what?"

"The unspeakable, unimaginable…" His voice was filled with the hoarseness of one on their deathbed. "Bigger than everything, cannot be seen, in the world… will be arriving soon."

Lu Feng's voice was very low. "How do you know?"

"I'm almost dead… I can feel it. I can hear it." His words were as slow as sleeptalk that had been stretched out countless times.

"What can you hear?"

"I can hear…" The old man continued, "Chaotic—"

As he spoke, the old man looked up at the gray sky above the city. An Zhe followed his gaze and looked up as well. The sky was so low as to be frightening, heavily weighing down on the upper part of his field of vision. The aurora was so bright, its green glow also lowered and mixed with the dark gray cloud cover. Lu Feng said that the reason why the aurora was so bright was because the base had adjusted the frequency of the artificial magnetic field to be stronger in order to resist distortion.

"People live on the ground and die on the ground. The sky…" The old man's expression was peaceful, and his voice became softer and softer. "The sky will only get lower."

After he spat out the last word, he slowly folded his hands.

His eyes slowly, slowly slid shut.

Xi Bei's knees went soft, and he knelt in front of the old man and put both hands on his knees. "Grandfather? Grandfather?"

No response.

The old man's chest stopped rising and falling. He was gone.

His death occurred in the span of only a moment.

Two streams of tears flowed from Xi Bei's eyes, and he buried his face against the old man's knees.

When he finally lifted his head back up, An Zhe softly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm… okay." Xi Bei blankly looked at his grandfather's face and mumbled, "In the past, Grandfather said he wasn't afraid of death. He said that when people live, they each have their own mission, and his mission was to protect everyone in the mine. Having been able to see the mine live up to today was… was enough for him."

He lifted his head to look at the old man's face, the haggard and dusty face. His white hair was unkempt, with some parts tangled together. In the dark underground, nobody could live with dignity.

He said, "I… I'll go find a comb."

He dazedly got up and walked toward the other rooms.

A dwindling life had passed.

In this place, there was also another life that had passed a long time ago. An Zhe turned to look at the living room sofa, where a skeleton lay.

Its flesh must have naturally decayed, because with the skeleton as the center, the sofa was covered with green, yellow, or brown splotches, which were the traces of where mold had grown.

"Initially it was superbacteria, fungi, and viruses. They propagated in the human cities, indiscriminately infecting all people and leaving corpses

everywhere in the cities. Those who have been to the ruins in the wilds all know about this." What Poet had once said sounded in An Zhe's ears.

He lifted his head and looked out the window. This was a building that had passed away, a city that had passed away. The buildings were full of skeletons, and every skeleton was a life that had passed away.

Lu Feng saw An Zhe's eyes, which were still so calm, as though it were the gaze of someone completely uninvolved. But in the lighting of the gray sky, the subtle movements on his quiet and beautiful face combined together, yet his face also showed an indescribable sorrow that was like a wisp of smoke.

After looking away and at the city instead, he said, "When the human base was completed and the comprehensive search and rescue carried out, the base's strength was insufficient, so many small cities did not receive a timely rescue."

An Zhe looked at the boundless ocean-like stretch of buildings. To walk from this end of the city to the other end, it would take at least several hours. He softly asked, "Is this a small city?"

Lu Feng said, "Yes."

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

What seemed to him to be a city unmatched in vastness, to the once thriving and glorious humans, was unexpectedly just a small city that had not received a timely rescue.

Then before the Age of Calamity, exactly how magnificent was the humans' world? He did not know.

And since there were handfuls of people around the city who were clinging to life amidst the calamity, then in countless places, were there also countless unrescued people struggling, despairing, and dying? This city was full of skeletons, the base was by no means safe and calm, and the human world was full of crying, weeping, and screaming.

The gradual fall of such a grand whole—while imagining this sight, he seemed to see a huge sunset gradually, gradually sinking into the black horizon, a protracted death.

"Clunk—"

Amidst the dead silence, from the next-door bedroom suddenly came the sound of something falling to the ground.

Lu Feng asked, "What is it?"

There was no reply, only the sound of Xi Bei's trembling breaths.

Frowning, Lu Feng took the gun, turned, and walked over, with An Zhe following him.

The room was empty, devoid of both monsters and enemies, but as Xi Bei faced away from them, his back trembled violently. At first, An Zhe thought he was crying. Then, after walking over to him, An Zhe saw that he was staring at a comb in his hand.

For a while, An Zhe found it difficult to describe the wooden comb because it was not only one, but rather two combs fused together. It was the most common kind of brown wood comb, with a handle ten centimeters long and fine teeth. The handles of the two equally common wooden combs were perfectly joined together, as though they had been carved from the same piece of wood. The teeth were tilted forty-five degrees, one to the left and one to the right, like a two-headed snake spitting out its tongues.

But if they were initially just two ordinary combs, how could they have fused together?

Wood, the product of a tree, was the most ordinary and safest thing, but because of this strange appearance that went beyond common sense, it brought about the most unrivaled terror.

Lu Feng strode to the dresser where Xi Bei got the comb. This was clearly a woman's room before the great Calamity Age. Upon the ivory-white dresser rested countless bottles, jars, and tools of various sizes.

Lu Feng reached out to wipe away the dust on the mirror, but after wiping away one layer, there was another layer underneath. The dust seemed to be forming inside the mirror, and the mirror was always clouded over, distorting their figures into a blob of black.

While looking at all of this, An Zhe suddenly recalled that when he was climbing the wall of the Outer City, one layer of sand fell, but inside was yet more sand, as though the city wall had become an aggregate of sand and steel.

Lu Feng no longer looked at the mirror. With brows furrowed, he glanced over the variously sized makeup tools, then finally pulled out a rusty long tweezer—although it also wasn't a tweezer, because this metal tweezer was stuck to a plastic eyebrow trimming knife, and the X-shaped part in the middle connecting them was fused together seamlessly. It was hard to say whether it was steel or plastic, or a brand-new material unknown to humans.

Xi Bei's fingers trembled, and, with a clack, the comb fell to the dusty floor.

"Does this city… have some strange thing about it?" he asked. “Let's… Let's hurry and go."

"It's not just this city," Lu Feng said.

As he looked at the fused tweezers and eyebrow trimmer, he spoke only two words.

"The engines."

These ordinary two words sounded in the room like a thunderclap.

There were complex mechanical structures inside the engine. Once those precise structures were damaged—

If strange fusions and changes occurred inside the insides of the engines like this comb, then the plane crashes were inevitable.

An Zhe bent down and picked up the comb. No trace of a join could be seen, but the carvings on the handle were chaotic, both chaotic and mad. It

was impossible to imagine how they were fused together, just like the flight manual's writing with the inky tentacles that reached out every which way.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly. Suddenly, the words that Madam Lu spoke after transforming into a bee and before flying into the boundless sky sounded in his ears.

"Humans' genes are too weak, so they are unable to perceive the changes currently happening in the world. We will all die. All work was futile. It only proves the insignificance and powerlessness of humankind."

The thought crossed his mind like lightning slicing across the sky.

If, if… when people and monsters or monsters and monsters physically overlapped or got close, genetic contamination would occur—

No, that was wrong, that was completely wrong.

"Genes…" he mumbled. "It's not genes…"

The problem was not genes at all.

Humans believed that alterations in genes were the fundamental cause of the contamination. But contamination was the fusing and recombining of the flesh and blood between one organism and another. Their own attributes had changed, but these alterations were completed by genetic changes.

If, if something like mutual contamination could occur, if a living creature's qualities could instantly change, why couldn't other things do the same? And what was the difference between the bodies of living things—those DNA helices—and the world's other inanimate materials?

Therefore, paper and wood would also contaminate each other, and steel and plastic would as well.

In that case, all tangible things in the world would as well.

It was just that this process was taking place gradually, not immediately. The flood current had only just begun to surge; with the contamination of organisms' genes as an omen, it had only just appeared before humankind.

Over the period of time when the geomagnetic field had disappeared, those hybrid-class monsters madly ate, madly acquiring the forms of other

creatures to strengthen themselves just like humans hoarding food for the winter.

Had they felt something humans had not?

Had they known what was coming?

Xi Bei's voice trembled. "Exactly wh…"

He could no longer speak.

Exactly what kind of age was this?

Exactly what kind of disaster were they faced with?

Exactly what was happening right now?

What was it?

What was it?

A streak of lightning cut across the sky. The windows vibrated, and the primeval wind made drawn-out howling noises as it poured into the room through the crevices. The hems of their clothes flapped about, blown by the wind.

An Zhe lifted his head, and he and Lu Feng locked eyes. Those cold green eyes were as dark and gloomy as the sky outside.

Right when they looked at each other, a peal of thunder sounded in the sky. The sky lowered even further, and between the vast heavens and earth, torrential rain came pouring down.

In the sheets of rain, nothing outside could be seen nor heard—boundless darkness, boundless emptiness, boundless terror.

Madam Lu's gentle and mellow voice and Grandfather's withered and raspy voice overlapped as they sounded abruptly in An Zhe's ear.

"It's almost time."

Then they found even more proof in the room.

The difficulty in opening the window was because the steel edge of the window had adhered to the sill.

The skeleton's leg bones, upon more careful examination, had fused with the couch beneath them. The ugliest existence was a chandelier in the

form of an inverted cluster of lily-of-the-valley flowers on the ceiling of the second bedroom. Its lampshade and metal stand had fused together, melted, and flowed down like a candle that had burned to the end. The formerly snow-white lampshade was filled with pitch-black dust, and each speck of dust was a pinprick-sized black dot. They densely clustered together, as though in the very next moment they would creep forth.

All of these things that were strange, should not have happened, and exceeded the limits of human understanding and science combined, giving An Zhe a certain impression—just like wax being melted by fire, the world was gradually blending together.

Xi Bei returned to the living room. He dumbly sat on the floor and picked up Grandfather's body, lifting it from the chair before getting far away from that place with Grandfather, as though the chair was the most frightening monster, as though in the very next moment this body would be one with the chair. After getting far away from the chair, he put Grandfather on the floor, but the muscles in his cheek immediately twitched with nervousness—after all, the floor was a monster, too.

He gave a start and suddenly took a few rapid steps backward, for his own existence was also a source of contamination.

Seeing his panic-stricken and helpless appearance, An Zhe stepped forward, but just as he took one step, Xi Bei looked at him with terrified eyes and retreated a few steps.

Supposing everything in the world would pollute each other, then only by staying far away from everything would one be able to preserve oneself.

An Zhe could understand his fear, and he distanced himself, unbidden, from Xi Bei again.

"Sorry, I…" Xi Bei's teeth chattered. "I have to… calm down a bit."

Lu Feng led An Zhe into the bedroom.

After stepping into the bedroom and seeing the flowing chandelier once more, he stopped in his tracks. An Zhe looked at the Colonel and saw that

his green eyes seemed to have frozen over.

The next moment, Lu Feng took out his communicator from his coat pocket and held it tightly, his knuckles white.

An Zhe simply watched from the side. Xi Bei had already fallen apart, and as a human, he knew that Lu Feng's state would not be much better than Xi Bei's. In fact, the Colonel had experienced even more things than Xi Bei. While enduring the fear brought about by this mad world, he still needed to think about the distant human base.

He needed to stay strong, for the human base if for no one else.

If the engines in the plane had broken down due to the mutual contamination of substances, the communicator would as well. There was a screwdriver in the drawer of the bedroom nightstand. Lu Feng picked it up and loosened the screws on the communicator's chassis.

The chassis, intricately lined chips, crisscrossing circuits, and countless small parts were laid out on the bed. Lu Feng picked them up one at a time and examined their minute structures in the light.

The communicator had many parts. After looking for a while, An Zhe also picked up a few components with relatively simple structures from amongst the pile of parts and checked whether they conformed to the clear-cut standards of humankind's machinery.

After closing the bedroom door, it seemed like only the two of them were left in the world. Neither of them spoke. In the rain, apart from the sounds of them going through the parts, nothing could be heard. Lu Feng's speed was very fast; those parts seemed all very normal.

But An Zhe was suddenly stunned.

He looked at a small chip board in his hand. Upon it were two parallel red copper wires, both consisting of several dozen strands of fine copper wire twisted together. They originally should have been parallel to each other, with a few millimeters of distance in between. But now they were all loosened up and bent into strange arcs. The two copper wires had gotten

close to each other and were mixed together, which was definitely not ordinary.

At this moment, at least for a brief moment, An Zhe suddenly thought that if even the communicator was thoroughly broken due to the distortion of matter, if Lu Feng could never return to the base, what would they do?

But he was not such an evil mushroom.

As he looked at the chip in his hand, he bit his lip. Amidst the slight pain, in the end he still tugged on the edge of Lu Feng's sleeve.

On the inner side of Lu Feng's military boot, there was a hidden buckle, and tucked inside was a sharp dagger that was now removed. An Zhe lit the chip with a flashlight that had been taken from the mine, then watched Lu Feng pick apart the tangled copper wires with the tip of the dagger bit by bit. Signs of adhesion had already appeared between the copper wires, but fortunately it had been discovered in time, so they could still be separated.

When it was finally cleaned up, however, An Zhe's mental state was slightly strained. But he also felt a slight dizziness in his head, as though he were sick. Ever since the spore started showing signs of maturity, his body had weakened more and more.

Lu Feng examined the remaining parts one more time, then assembled them in the proper order and pressed the button to turn on the communicator.

But what came out was not the "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the signal has been interrupted…" that An Zhe was accustomed to.

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

The rain got louder again. Thousands of big raindrops pelted the window like bullets, making ceaseless thudding noises. This was a

rainstorm that would only occur in midsummer, and outside the window, it had become a gray waterfall.

The raindrops seemed to strike An Zhe's very soul.

In a trance, he vaguely heard the soft mechanical female voice come out of the communicator, but the dizziness became more severe. Before his eyes, the world turned into colorful lights—and in the following second, he pitched straight forward.

Before losing consciousness, he had only one thought.

I hope the spore won’t fall out so soon.

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“BUT I MET YOU.”

LASTLY, he saw Lu Feng's face. He had never seen such a perturbed expression on the Colonel's face before. He wanted to say something, but no words could come out—

His vision went black, and his body was an empty hollow.

Gently, a thread of something broke inside his body.

It hurt so much.

Then the second thread broke.

He strove to understand what had happened. At last, his consciousness seemed to turn into a pinprick of light in the void, and he finally saw what was happening.

The slender and snow-white thread gradually elongated until it was almost transparent, fragile to the point of being frightening.

Snap.

With a pain like that of a needle stab, it broke.

His spore.

The hyphae from his body were connected to every single strand of the spore's hyphae, and now, these strands were snapping one after another. It wasn't that he was letting go of his own accord, it was the spore taking the initiative to leave—no, that wasn't it either.

It was the time of maturation, and the power of life was separating them.

An Zhe could stop nothing. It was difficult to say what sort of deep sentiments there were between a mushroom and its spores. Their relationship was by no means like that of human parents and children, but he still did not want the spore to leave him so soon. It was still so dangerous outside. If the spore left him, no matter what it encountered, it would meet a premature end—especially if it was Lu Feng.

But he had lost all his senses and could say nothing. He could only desperately speak to the spore in his heart.

Don't come out.

Don't come out.

It's too dangerous.

When there were only three strands of hyphae left, his fear of death reached its peak.

Don't come out—I'm begging you.

As he dripped with cold sweat, his eyes flew open.

Before his eyes was the ceiling. He slowly blinked, then gave a sudden start.

It was still there.

He could still feel the spore inside his body, the three strands of hyphae tenuously holding it. Fortunately it appeared to have settled down, seeming to have finally decided to obey his request.

Then, the doctor's voice unexpectedly came to his ear, and at first he dazedly thought he had returned to the base. Only in the next moment did he realize that it was the sound of the communicator.

After fixing the distorted copper wires, Lu Feng contacted the base as expected. He felt a sense of loss, although it was not right.

"… I'm telling you with certainty that humankind is coming to its end." The doctor's pessimistic view came from the communicator. An Zhe moved a little and discovered that he was lying in Lu Feng's arms and that Lu Feng's coat was draped over him. Lu Feng saw that he had woken up.

He seemed to want to say something. An Zhe signaled with his eyes for Lu Feng to focus on continuing the call, then weakly rested his forehead against Lu Feng's chest.

"This isn't some predictable disaster at all. This is a mass extinction. I can tell you, it's the mass extinction of all of the living things, non-living things, and all laws of physics."

Lu Feng said, "I've seen the fusion of materials."

"It's not called fusion. Our latest definition is distortion, the distortion of the whole at the microscopic level. Did you know? Underneath the microscope, a silicon atom changed into—changed into something we don't know. This is not genetic contamination at all, it's a change at the quantum level, something we can never observe. According to the uncertainty principle, we can't overcome it, ever. Even if technology advanced another ten thousand years, we could only accept death," the doctor said. "We… We… We currently only know that the magnetic field can protect the earth from the effects of this change. After the two bases increased the strength of the magnetic field, the distortion stopped temporarily. But you know, the situation is always worsening."

It seemed that his nervousness made him chatter away. "In the past, infection only occurred with serious injuries, but afterward, infection occurred with light injuries as well, and after that, infection occurred with mere touch, and finally, infection occurred without any contact. I thought this was the worst-case scenario, but you know what? The basic structures of the world are in chaos, and it's obvious that the process is gradually strengthening. The world is becoming more and more chaotic. Our magnetic field can stop it for now, but what about later? What about when not even the highest strength of the artificial magnetic field can ward it off? The maximum intensity of our magnetic field is level 9, and it's currently at level 7. We're almost at the end. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or in

half a year at the latest, our artificial magnetic poles will break because of the distortions."

"The base hopes you can come back, but in fact if you want to find a place to spend the rest of your life, I absolutely won't stop you," he said. "The end is coming."

Lu Feng said, "I understand."

"If you haven't found An Zhe, there's no need to keep looking. Spare him, spare yourself, and live well. In any case, you'll die soon," the doctor said. "Even If you bring the sample back, we can't get any research results. This isn't something science can do—although the base still wants to fight for the last glimmer of hope."

After a pause, the doctor said, "I've fallen apart, sorry. I've been infected by the pessimism of the base. Don't listen to a single one of my words. The sample must be brought back. Since the sample is inert against infection, it may also be inert against distortion. This is the last breakthrough point, the final hope. Either you die out there, or you bring it back. But according to An Zhe's actions when he suddenly disappeared, he may be a kind of xenogenic with very strange abilities and form. You must be careful."

The doctor's resigned tone and erroneous estimation of his strength made the corners of An Zhe's lips curl up, but at the same time, he understood that the base was still fixated on his spore.

"Rest well," Lu Feng said to the doctor. "I've already sent the coordinates to the United Front Center."

The communication line was cut off.

Lu Feng looked at An Zhe.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm okay," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng asked, "What happened just now?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"You don't know either?"

An Zhe said in a small voice, "That's not it."

Then he said, "I can't tell you."

He suddenly found that Lu Feng's eyes were frighteningly cold.

"Mm." Lu Feng's fingers gently smoothed his hair, and his voice was flat as he said, "So you can't tell me about the sample either."

An Zhe hung his head. Regarding the spore, he had nothing to say. It was like this before, and it was like this now.

In this world, peaceful times were illusory. Like a dream coming to an end, he and Lu Feng ultimately returned to a few days ago.

Arbiter and xenogenic, pursuer and pursued. He wouldn't hand over the spore, and Lu Feng wouldn't spare him.

He was unwilling to look into Lu Feng's eyes, so he could only change the topic. "Is the base in very bad shape now?"

"Mm-hm."

"Then are you still going to go back?"

"Yes," Lu Feng said.

"But the doctor said… there's no more hope," he said in a small voice.

Then he realized the stupidity of his sentence. Even if the base was about to perish, it was impossible for Lu Feng to not go back.

After a long silence, Lu Feng said, "I am a person of the base."

An Zhe pursed his lips. Lu Feng belonged to the base, just like how he belonged to the Abyss. It was impossible for them to peacefully coexist. Lu Feng had already sent the coordinates to the United Front Center, and he refused to divulge the spore's whereabouts. He couldn't imagine what would happen to him next.

He looked at Lu Feng. In the sheets of rain outside, the light was dim. He could neither clearly see nor understand Lu Feng.

As the world's changes became more and more mad, even the doctor said the words "humankind is coming to its end." In the final moments

before humankind's extinction, what was Lu Feng thinking? He did not know. He just quietly looked at Lu Feng.

"Sometimes I think that if the base is bound to perish in my lifetime," Lu Feng said, his voice very low, "everything I've done before…"

He stopped and did not finish his sentence. This fluctuation in mood was like a ripple on the water, very swiftly frozen.

"Maybe a miracle will happen." An Zhe could only softly say that sentence. It was the only thing he could think of that might comfort Lu Feng.

Lu Feng looked down at him. "Do you think there's a possibility?"

"I guess. Just like… Just like how this world is very big, but when something happened to your plane, you just happened to fall near me," An Zhe said. "If that wasn't the case, you would have died."

Supposing Lu Feng had died, there would also not have been the current An Zhe who had once again appeared in the human city either. Everything would have been different.

But Lu Feng only looked at him. As he lay in Lu Feng's arms, he simply —simply looked down at him. In that pair of green eyes that were devoid of warmth, there was only a hint of a chill. "Do you have any idea how big the world is?"

An Zhe thought back. In his limited memories, he hadn't walked many roads nor seen many things. He was just an inert mushroom. But this world must be very big, for only then could the fall of Lu Feng's plane and subsequent landing in front of him be called a miracle.

So he slowly nodded.

He wanted Lu Feng to be a little happier, but the current Lu Feng was so frightening. Looking at Lu Feng's expressionless profile, An Zhe could not help cowering a little.

"You don't know," Lu Feng said, his voice icy. "I couldn't possibly have landed in front of you by coincidence. As for why, it's because I had

originally come to capture you."

"No." An Zhe couldn't bear his gaze. He wanted to leave, but he was held in Lu Feng's unyielding embrace. His voice went hoarse. "There were many planes that day. You all were going… going to kill the bees. It was only… only after accidentally encountering me that you wanted to capture me."

"She's already been killed," Lu Feng said calmly.

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

He asked shakily, "… Who?"

Lu Feng said, "Her."

An Zhe only heard a single syllable. He didn’t know if that was him, her, or it. When this syllable was spoken from Lu Feng's mouth, there could only be one possibility.

Madam Lu.

He personally killed Madam Lu.

An Zhe could hardly breathe. His chest heaved violently.

Lu Feng looked at him and put his fingers to the side of An Zhe's neck. Together, his index and middle fingers pressed down on An Zhe's fragile and warm carotid artery. There wasn't the slightest hint of emotional fluctuation in his voice. "The final mission is to kill you. Did you not hear the command from the communicator?"

An Zhe did.

The pressure made his neck hurt a little, and he reached up to move Lu Feng's hand aside, but he could not push him away. With a sour lump in his throat, he said, "But the world… the world is so big. You didn't know at all that I was there."

Lu Feng looked at An Zhe.

In his arms, An Zhe was so small. The doctor had said that he could instantly escape the base and may be an unusually powerful xenogenic, but

Lu Feng knew him. As such a frail and little thing, it seemed that anyone could harm him, whether physically or mentally.

Lu Feng did not clearly hear what he was saying. He only saw that the rims of An Zhe's eyes had reddened, as though he was desperately trying to prove that it was an accident, a coincidence. He seemed to be striving to deceive himself into believing something, so as to excuse Lu Feng.

He took something out from his uniform pocket.

It was a thin glass bottle as long as a thumb and filled with light green liquid. There was a label on the middle of it, and on the label, a bar code and string of numbers had been printed.

As An Zhe looked at it, he asked, "What is this?"

Lu Feng said flatly, "Tracking agent."

An Zhe had heard that name before. He remembered that Lily had once said she'd been injected with a tracking agent. Humankind's nomenclatures were always brief and to the point. One would know this drug's usage as soon as they heard its name.

"The Lighthouse said that by irradiating the tracking solution with a special-frequency pulse, it can acquire a characteristic frequency. After being irradiated, the tracking agent is split into two parts. One part is injected into the body, and the other part is preserved. By injecting the preserved tracking agent into the analyzer, the direction of the tracking fluid with the same frequency can be indicated," Lu Feng said. "No matter how far."

An Zhe curled his fingers around the ice-cold little tube and held it in his hand.

"Did you inject me with a tracking agent?" His voice trembled slightly. "When did you do it? I… I didn't know."

As he spoke, a thought suddenly crossed his mind.

His voice lowered, and there was a sour lump in his throat that made him almost unable to speak. "Did you suspect that I was a xenogenic since

long ago?"

"You were able to pass all the judgment criteria, so I didn't kill you." Lu Feng's voice grew more icy. He pried An Zhe's fingers off, took the tracking agent, and put it back into his pocket. "But I must be responsible for the safety of the base."

An Zhe stared dumbly at him, and a single tear slid from the corner of his eye. He thought Lu Feng would wipe it away, but he did not. The wet trail quietly cooled on his cheek. Just now, Lu Feng had said very little, but it was enough to show his character. He had already mercilessly killed Madam Lu, the queen bee.

He knew what kind of person the Colonel was from the very first day. Perhaps it was the Lu Feng of these past few days, the Lu Feng who was good to him, who was the fleeting facade.

After he had resumed communication with the base, where did An Zhe get the self-confidence to believe that Lu Feng had been giving him special treatment and that he would spare him?

In that manner, Lu Feng looked at An Zhe, who was still in his arms, as his eyelashes slowly drooped. In the end, he leaned against Lu Feng's chest and closed his eyes. Thus the soft wet glimmer in the little xenogenic's eyes was covered up as well. He seemed to have become heartbroken after that honest explanation of all his actions, Lu Feng thought.

Just like all the people who died by his hand.

But An Zhe opened his eyes again, and he tilted his head back to look at Lu Feng. His voice was very small, so Lu Feng had to lean in closer before he could hear it.

"When Madam Lu became a queen bee, she had completely lost her human mind," he said. "She said to me… She didn't hate the base, she just wanted to experience new forms of life. She didn't hate you."

In the death-like silence, Lu Feng said nothing. The time passed minute by minute and second by second. When An Zhe reached up to touch Lu

Feng's cheek to confirm that he was still alive, he saw the corners of Lu Feng's thin, cold lips curl up.

His voice was very soft yet certain.

"She hated me."

An Zhe looked into his eyes.

Madam Lu had said that Lu Feng would never get what he wanted, that he would die a miserable death, and that he would eventually go mad.

He asked, "Why?"

"After I was born, her relationship with my father was discovered by the base, and she was never able to freely meet him again. I killed my father and killed many of her children. When her little daughter escaped from the Garden of Eden with her help, she ran into me. In fact, the day you and I ran into Lily, her friend who had come to assist was standing on the other side of the road."

Lu Feng seldom spoke at such length, and An Zhe had long ago gotten accustomed to hanging on his every word. When Lu Feng finally finished speaking, he was nearly out of breath.

The silence lasted three seconds.

"The happy things in her life were very few, but I destroyed all of them," Lu Feng said. "Just like everyone else in the base, she hated me."

While looking at him, An Zhe opened his mouth.

In the end, he finally knew what he wished to say.

"I don't hate you," he said.

A long silence.

"Why?" Lu Feng's slightly raspy voice suddenly sounded in his ear.

"What… do you mean, why?" he asked.

"Why can you…"—Lu Feng looked at him—"always forgive me?"

An Zhe looked up at him, but what he saw this time was not that frosty Lu Feng.

The Colonel's voice trembled imperceptibly as he asked again, "Why?"

An Zhe wanted to say it, but he couldn't. He didn't have as high of an intellect as humans, nor did he know that many of their words. He thought for a very long time.

"I understand you," he said.

"You aren't even human." Lu Feng's fingers clamped down on his shoulder. The look in his eyes was still as cold as before, but in his voice, something seemed to fall apart, and he asked almost shakily, "What do you understand about me?"

He still wanted to ask.

But An Zhe could say nothing more. He desperately shook his head.

An Zhe could only be driven into a corner one step at a time by Lu Feng. He wanted to cry again. He did not know why this man would be so evil. Today, this man did not hesitate to cut open all of him. He himself was like a court justice who wished to acquit the criminal, but the criminal below the bench kept making declarations aggravating his own misconduct. This person insisted on being tried, insisted on being sentenced to death.

That was how much he wanted An Zhe to hate him.

An Zhe did not know why things had reached this point. Clearly, at the very beginning they had only been talking about whether the base could survive or not, about how this world was so big, and about how Lu Feng landing in front of him really was a miracle or not.

Lu Feng had said that it was not, that all of this was premeditated, inevitable.

But it wasn't, it really wasn't.

"But…" As he faced Lu Feng, he lifted his own arm, and those distinct human fingers gradually changed.

Snow-white hyphae climbed up Lu Feng's black uniform and crawled over the Arbiter's epaulets and silver tassels.

Tears kept flowing from his eyes, and he could not clearly see Lu Feng's expression. He only knew that the hand Lu Feng was holding him with was

trembling, and he held him even more tightly.

He knew that Lu Feng would be able to recognize him as the mushroom that had been rolling around in the Abyss. He tearfully choked out, "But I met you…"

The world was so vast, and Lu Feng had insisted on going to the Abyss. The Abyss was so big, and he had insisted on going to those open plains to roll around.

They were originally not meant to meet.

He had never hurt any person or any creature. He only wished to quietly raise his own spore. Had he been able to do so, he thought, he might've been spared so much heartache and pain.

But why would there be a human like Lu Feng in this world?

This human held him with such great strength, it was like he wanted to kill him. With his back pressed against the bedpost, he desperately struggled. The struggle was utterly fruitless, but he was unwilling to turn into hyphae form to escape, reluctant to admit that he was outmatched.

He recklessly bit down on Lu Feng's neck with all his might.

It was only at the moment the taste of blood rushed into his mouth that An Zhe was dazed.

What am I doing? he thought

But his chance was gone, for the brief daze was enough for Lu Feng to regain the upper hand.

His shoulder was pressed down, his back hit the bedpost, and a hand forcibly lifted his jaw.

Lu Feng forcefully kissed him.

39

“I'M GOING NOW.”

HIS KISS WAS FIERCE, inexorable, and tinged with blood. An Zhe couldn’t breathe at all. He turned his head away but was then made to turn back.

He had just been feeling sad for Lu Feng mere moments ago, but now he was trembling all over with anger, and his hyphae spread out in big clumps. With only an instinctual resistance remaining, he thought to completely restrain Lu Feng.

But his eyes suddenly went blurry, and a vision appeared before him.

A figure fell over in front of him, and his heart clenched suddenly. He caught him and held him tightly in his arms. "An Zhe?"

Suddenly, An Zhe realized that this was a fragment of Lu Feng’s memories. He had drunk Lu Feng’s blood, so he would acquire some things. What had occurred just now was the scene from earlier in which he had passed out.

"An Zhe?" Lu Feng called his name several times in a row. However, the person in his arms gave no response at all; he only frowned a little and trembled all over, as though he was enduring great suffering.

Why he would suddenly become like this, Lu Feng did not know. He could only hold him tight.

He seemed to suddenly be on the verge of death—just like this volatile world.

In a daze, An Zhe experienced the feelings from that moment. Right now, his feelings and Lu Feng’s were overlapping.

Lu Feng was afraid.

He was actually afraid.

What was he afraid of?

He was afraid of losing this person in his arms, as though… as though by losing him, he would lose everything.

An Zhe began to tremble violently.

This man—

Why was it that he could be so good to him, yet also treat him with such fierceness?

The force on his shoulder made him wake up briefly from the vision, and his awareness was divided in two. One half of him was being kissed by Lu Feng in such a way that it was almost a punishment, while the other half of him was submerged in the memories of the past, witnessing this man holding him in his arms and repeatedly calling his name.

But he couldn't be roused. He looked to be such a sorrowful, docile, and frail person, yet he was enduring such intense suffering.

Lu Feng wiped away the sheen of cold sweat from his forehead, and he unconsciously grabbed Lu Feng's wrist like a drowning man clutching at a straw. At this moment, what was Lu Feng thinking?

He was thinking, *I can suffer in his place, I can do anything, just so long as he wakes up again*.

An Zhe closed his eyes. He was still resisting, but with less strength than before—as though he had instantly lost heart. In the end, he could only give up all resistance and let Lu Feng seize his lips and his spirit, his everything.

It was like an endless war.

Amidst this endless stalemate, the intense emotions gradually became spent.

When he was finally released, he leaned against Lu Feng's chest, having no desire to say anything.

And Lu Feng held him, equally silent.

The blank span of time was drawn out indefinitely. In the first place, there wasn't much to say between an Arbiter and a xenogenic.

In the long silence, Lu Feng suddenly spoke up.

He asked, "How did you turn into a person?"

"Because of An Ze," An Zhe said.

He leaned into Lu Feng’s arms, the two of them having come completely clean to each other. In that impulse-driven kiss, they had both cut the other open.

Thus, he no longer had anything left to hide.

In fact, he wasn't a xenogenic.

He was very useless, unable to infect anyone. He was actually a mushroom who had been infected by a human.

Lu Feng looked at his hyphae. The snow-white hyphae were still stained with blood, blood that had been drawn when An Zhe bit down. It turned out that when this little mushroom became angry, he would also be very fierce.

The blood was disappearing bit by bit as it got absorbed by the hyphae.

An Zhe looked at the same spot.

He suddenly said, "You should just die."

Lu Feng tightly held his fingers and asked, "Why?"

"I'll grow on your body," An Zhe said expressionlessly, "and eat all of your blood, organs, and flesh, then grow on your bones."

With his other hand, Lu Feng slowly gripped An Zhe’s wrist, and his fingertips slid over the white skin, leaving behind a pale red mark. It was like he had damaged a white mushroom that had popped up after the rain, its juices flowing out. He asked in a low voice, "Do you know what you're saying?"

An Zhe shook his head, a lump forming in his throat. With tear-filled eyes, he looked up at the walls that were covered with deep green traces of mold and at the distorted flowing chandelier. The strong winds had broken the window, and rain poured in through the radiating crack, accompanied by the wind's mournful whispers.

He thought that he didn't know how to define his emotions either, but if he wanted to peacefully stay together with Lu Feng, there truly was no other path to take.

In this manner, he looked at the unreachable sky.

Lu Feng said, "You're crying again."

An Zhe turned his head back to look at Lu Feng. At this angle, he needed to tilt his head back slightly.

So they locked eyes.

For some reason, while looking at Lu Feng, An Zhe smiled again.

The corners of his lips were slightly reddened, and the corners of his beautiful eyes were still damp.

So Lu Feng smiled as well.

He held An Zhe's face in his hands. "… So silly."

An Zhe only looked at him. After a very long time, he asked, "Is the base already coming to fetch you?"

Lu Feng said, "Yes."

An Zhe said nothing. Lu Feng asked, "Do you like the base?"

Just as the word "base" was spoken, the pain of being electrocuted once again spread throughout An Zhe's body. He started trembling and forcefully burrowed into Lu Feng.

Lu Feng caught him and gently stroked his back. "I'm sorry."

An Zhe shook his head.

It wasn't until three minutes had gone by that An Zhe once again calmed down.

He tilted his head back to look at Lu Feng and tightly held his hand.

He seems to be waiting for something, Lu Feng thought.

He had that thought and acted on it. As though possessed by something, Lu Feng leaned down slightly and kissed An Zhe again.

No violent movements, no resistance, just a deep and quiet kiss.

An Zhe's soft lips no longer resisted. During the break when they were catching their breaths, Lu Feng looked at him—softly panting, slightly-lowered eyelashes strewn with glimmering droplets, hands gently resting upon his shoulders. It was a timid ingratiation, a gentle innocence, so pure that it bordered on compassion. Within that compassion was divinity; it was like the alms offered up by a spirit, and right now he was demanding everything.

But he was still crying.

Lu Feng kissed away his tears, as if by doing so he could erase all the sorrows between them.

By the time they were done, the rain outside had gradually come to a stop, and the evening sky was glowing with a cloudy, pale light.

An Zhe knelt on the bed, his fingers trembling as he held Lu Feng and slowly, slowly laid him flat on the bed.

Lu Feng's eyes were shut, for he had fallen asleep. His breathing was even, and now nothing could wake him. Achieving this was very simple; during the kiss, An Zhe only needed to transform part of the tip of his tongue into soft hyphae. Not even the Colonel could tell.

The sleeping Lu Feng could not catch him. He could not do anything to him.

An Zhe smiled. In fact, Lu Feng had never been able to do anything at all to him, he suddenly realized.

To leave or to stay.

He had to decide for himself.

Suddenly—

An Zhe's vision went black, and violent pain tore through him. The last hypha broke.

Something was separated, like a human losing an arm or an eye—but no, it wasn't those trivial things. The spore's existence was far more important than limbs or organs.

His body suddenly became empty. It was a deeper and hollower emptiness compared to losing the immature spore. Like a rest in a piece of music, his connection with the world was abruptly cut off. The most important things were stripped out, leaving him with only a broken and declining body.

A body.

An Zhe was suddenly stunned.

At that moment, he was sure that he heard fate whispering like a devil into his ear.

He blankly looked forward and shakily lifted his hand.

Right before this moment, he had assumed he still had a choice.

He truly thought he could choose.

But when it happened, he discovered that he had never had the leeway to choose.

He was completely dumbfounded.

The spore swam out of his body, and he held it in his hand. An Zhe blankly looked at the little white thing and finally forced himself to smile at it.

"… I'm sorry," he said.

"What…" he said. "What should I do? Do you wish to come with me? I may not be able… to raise you."

The spore's hyphae only rubbed against his fingers. It couldn't understand him, An Zhe knew. But the very next moment, the spore's hyphae began to slowly move in a certain direction all of a sudden. They

left An Zhe's fingers, dropped down until they landed on the surface of Lu Feng's black uniform, and continued crawling forward.

An Zhe observed this sight. This wasn't the first time the spore took such an action. Smiling, he asked, "Why do you like him so much?"

The spore stopped at one end of him and rubbed against his fingers again. It couldn't speak.

An Zhe softly sighed and put it on Lu Feng.

After being put down, it crawled to Lu Feng's chest with its newly born soft hyphae and spontaneously burrowed into his pocket. It was obviously so happy, as if it had wanted to do this for a long time.

An Zhe watched this sight. Just as he did not understand why the spore was so close to Lu Feng, he did not understand why things had suddenly reached this point.

From the backpack he took out a sheet of paper. He lay on his stomach in front of the tea table and wrote down a line of words on the paper.

"It's mature now, unlike before. Just put it in a place that's always damp and it'll grow up."

"It needs a lot of water and fears rodent-class animals and bugs."

"If you wish to do research, please don't hurt it too much or let it die."

"Thank you for always taking care of me."

"I'm going now."

After putting the note to one side, he reached into Lu Feng's chest pocket, took out the bottle of tracking agent, and unscrewed the bottle.

"Crash."

The pale green liquid poured out and flowed away along the crevices in the floor. Finally, he let go—with a clear sound, even the bottle was broken on the ground.

As though he had made one of the most crucial decisions in his life, he reached out, removed the badge on Lu Feng's chest, and put it in his own pocket.

Lastly, he picked up the backpack that was lying to one side. He took one final look at Lu Feng, then walked out of the room.

As Xi Bei looked at him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

An Zhe said, "I'm going outside to look at the situation."

"Okay." Xi Bei looked like he had calmed down a little. "Stay safe."

An Zhe nodded. "Okay."

He pushed open the room's rusty security door and took one step outside. At that moment, he looked back into the room, and his line of sight passed the skeleton on the sofa to arrive at the door Lu Feng was behind. That pale door seemed to hold a silent attractive force. If it were possible, if he had no worries whatsoever, he also would have wanted to stay at Lu Feng's side just like the spore, but he couldn't.

After closing the door, he walked upstairs. The stairs were so high, and his body seemed to have lost all its strength again. Only after climbing for a very long time did he reach the top floor. Following the openings at the very top, An Zhe arrived at the roof.

After a bout of rain, the atmosphere outside was frighteningly cold.

Over the few days that the artificial magnetic field disappeared and the atmosphere thinned, when he was still at the Lighthouse, he had heard the scientists predict that the weather this year would be extremely unusual and that winter would arrive at least three months early.

And the winter of his life was about to arrive as well.

The moment the spore matured, the instructions from life's instincts flashed before him, and he thoroughly received fate's mysterious instructions.

Just as how he had never again seen the mushroom that had raised him to maturity from the moment he landed on the ground, he was destined to be unable to protect his own spore so that it could safely grow up.

It was dry outside, with gale-force winds blowing at any given moment, and monsters lay in wait. Even in the Abyss that was free of rodent-class

and arthropod-class monsters, it may be unintentionally trampled by giant monsters or affected by conflict. At the last moment, he unexpectedly could only choose to believe Lu Feng.

Because he was dying.

A mushroom's lifespan was not very long in the first place. He was already considered one of the most outstanding amongst them. Everyone had their own mission. Once he completed that thing, he had fulfilled the purpose of living. To a mushroom, raising its spores to maturity was its only mission.

In the cold wind, An Zhe shivered slightly, and he hugged himself. Without feeling it, his body tottered. He had seen dead mushrooms before—when its spores fell, its cap would gradually crumble and curl up, then shrivel and wither, and finally all the tissues—the stem, hyphae, the roots in the soil—would all melt into a pool of inky liquid, and then be consumed by the other things in the soil.

Now, he was also about to experience the process he had witnessed countless times before. He did not know how long this process would take, but it would definitely be very fast, before humankind went completely extinct. When he left, he indeed wished to return with Lu Feng to the base, no matter what he would encounter next.

However, he thought that he should just let Lu Feng assume he was living in the wilderness. The Arbiter had personally witnessed far too many deaths already.

On the roof was a dilapidated garden. Hugging his knees, he sat behind a flower bed and faced the east to watch the night fall and the sun rise. This place wouldn't be too far from the base—it was merely the distance a bee covered in one day's flight.

In fact, just as he had expected, when the sunlight penetrated through the thin morning mist and shone upon the city, the humans' armored vehicles had stopped at the public square in front of the residential

community. Lu Feng must have already told them about the situation here—they brought sufficient heavy weaponry, and to a certain degree, they did not need to fear assaults from monsters. It was safe. For example, that massive eagle circled in the sky, covetously eyeing them, but it didn't dare to make any further moves.

Gray clouds, eagles, sprawling ruins of cities, and motorcades of armored vehicles seemed like things that would appear only in dreams. The sound of the wind started up again.

An Zhe watched Lu Feng’s and Xi Bei's figures walk out from the building, and after a simple interaction with the military, they got into the vehicles—An Zhe faintly glimpsed the doctor's shape. After the vehicle doors closed, the motorcade immediately started up and left the dilapidated ruins. When Lu Feng left, would he turn back to look through the car window at this city? He wouldn't know. The place he should return to was the Abyss. He had to return to that cave and find that set of white bones. Everything started from there, and everything would end there as well.

In the face of everything that was destined to go extinct, Lu Feng had Lu Feng's destiny, and he had his own destiny.

And now, it was all over.

40

“THE MOST MEMORABLE FEW DAYS OF HIS LIFE.”

ARMORED VEHICLE.

"Congratulations on making it back. We'll return to the base after a fifteen-hour drive. ”

Lu Feng asked, "How is the base?"

"The distortion has caused widespread panic and confusion, and some of the precision instruments can no longer be used. Fortunately, the artificial magnetic pole can operate normally."

"Do distortions appear when the magnetic poles don't work?"

"Yes."

Lu Feng said, "Over the past few days, some survivors and I were living in a magnetic iron mine, and no distortions occurred there."

"It's because of the magnetic field, which can resist distortion to a certain extent," the doctor said. "At the time, the Lighthouse fell into chaos. With the last glimmer of hope, we and the Underground City Base exchanged all the research results from over the years, but we got nothing at all. All of their research was also grounded in biological genes."

"Then I once again illegally accessed the communication channel that's connected to the Institute."

Lu Feng raised his eyebrows slightly.

"After joint discussion and the combination of some clues such as the point in time when the distortions occurred, we believe all of this may be

related to the magnetic field, so we've temporarily increased the strength of the artificial magnetic pole," the doctor said. "It's effective for now, and only by doing this have we gained some time to cling to life."

The doctor leaned against the vehicle seat. "But according to the calculations, the distortions will gradually strengthen, then defeat us within three months."

He paused and looked at the distant mist-adorned sky as well as the circling brown eagle, then said, "However, to know that all efforts humankind have put forth to survive from ancient times until now were futile and become a witness to humankind's complete extinction is actually also a kind of unimaginable honor."

He looked at Lu Feng again. "To be honest, you're a little calmer than I had imagined."

"What, did you get hit?" The doctor said. "I don't know what kind of species that An Zhe thing was, all slippery like a fish. He could even escape from defenses as tight as the base's, so it's normal to not have been able to capture him. Even if he was captured, we wouldn't be able to keep him, so don't take it too much to heart."

Lu Feng said nothing.

He held out his hand.

A soft snow-white thing rolled out of his sleeve.

He looked at it.

Strangely, a soft train of thought flooded his mind. It was like he'd returned to some moment when An Zhe was quietly staying at his side. After night fell, they slept together. At first, An Zhe had his back turned to Lu Feng, but as he slept, he would always roll over and gently rest against his chest. When morning arrived, after waking up, not even An Zhe himself knew why this would be the case—at that moment, he would furrow his fine and beautiful eyebrows, then turn back again. Then Lu Feng held him from behind.

Surprisingly, those turned out to be the most memorable few days of his life.

The snow-white and soft hyphae affectionately wound around his fingers.

The doctor was stunned. "You got it back? You were actually able to get it back?"

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

"Then what about An Zhe?" The doctor spoke extremely quickly. "Did you kill him?"

The spore seemed to have been startled by this person's suddenly raised voice. After shrinking a bit, it dove back into Lu Feng's sleeve.

But a while later, it reappeared at his collar and affectionately rubbed against his neck.

Lu Feng said flatly, "He left."

"How could you be willing to let him go? What exactly is he?" The doctor's eyes widened. "Can… Can he protect himself?"

Lu Feng touched the spore's soft hyphae with his fingers and did not reply. Beneath the gloomy daylight, the profile of his face was a silent silhouette.

The doctor examined him, but then he suddenly frowned. "Where's your gun?"

An Zhe stood on the rooftop.

As he watched the motorcade disappear into the distant sky, he moved his stiff body, standing up from behind the flower bed. Yesterday's rainstorm had filled the flower bed with water, and some thread-like creatures were currently wriggling in the water, newly born as of yesterday.

But after the weather cleared up, the accumulated water would soon be dried out. After a brief new life, they would face eternal death.

All creatures were like this.

Would his spore live longer than these ephemeral creatures? He hoped this was the case.

An Zhe waited patiently for an opportunity. When the eagle landed, he climbed onto its back. The eagle paid him no heed, perhaps because he was too light and too lacking in nutrients. An Zhe found a place to stay on its wide back. What really covered the surface of the eagle's body were not feathers, but scales, and in the crevices between the scales were intertwined translucent feelers. The eagle foraged for food in the city. After it devoured a meat-like vine and struggled for half an hour against a giant monster with bat wings, it lost the struggle and left the place.

An Zhe marked its flight direction against Polaris and his map. After discovering the departure from that trajectory, he surreptitiously slipped away, and after taking root in the soil and absorbing a night's worth of nutrients, he hesitated for a long time before removing from his backpack a pitch-black gun and a dozen or so bullets.

The gun was Lu Feng's, but it was only after Lu Feng had left that he discovered it in his backpack. The Colonel would often make use of his belongings as though it were completely natural, including his backpack, so An Zhe guessed that it led to him leaving the gun behind.

Using the sounds of gunfire, he successfully attracted a monster with butterfly wings to serve as a means of transportation.

Three days later, he landed again. When looking for the next target to hitch a ride on, An Zhe encountered an extremely ugly monster with a centipede-like body. It had many characteristics of ants and arthropod-class monsters, and it fed on mushrooms. An Zhe wanted to escape, but his body was already in very bad shape. Just as he was about to be completely eaten, Lu Feng's gun protected him. He had accidentally struck the monster's soft

belly, and when it briefly paused, he took advantage of that moment to roll into a muddy brook and escape.

The weather was getting cold, and those creatures who feared the cold began to travel south. Of course, they also preyed on each other in the process. Sometimes, across the boundless plains, there wasn't even the slightest trace of any living thing save for the occasional one or two extremely massive victors, and sometimes, social animals migrated southward like a black torrent. An Zhe blended in and drifted down the stream.

Ten days later, he finally got an indomitably southward-flying bird. After more than twenty additional days, from atop the bird's soft back, he saw a massive, long, and narrow shadow on the horizon, like a scar on the world.

According to humans, the Abyss's core was a long and narrow fault zone created by a magnitude 8 earthquake during the Great Calamity Age. The radiation there was extremely abnormal, which gave rise to countless fearsome monsters. Further out from the core's fault zone, to the north of the Abyss lay a vast plain that was densely covered with vegetation, full of various kinds of mushrooms, and a hibernation place for countless monsters, and to the south stretched a belt of rolling highlands and mountains.

The bird came to the edge of the Abyss and, tired out from flying, rested on the branch of a huge dead tree it found.

The tree branch suddenly began to tremble. The bird's feathers bristled, and it flapped its wings and screamed—

At some point, masses of black vines had appeared on the branch, and they had securely bound the bird's feet. Amidst the sound of fluttering wings, the snow-white bird was dragged to the center of the branch-laden tree. Its graceful neck arched high and its long pointed beak reached out

toward the gray sky as it struggled, but a vine wrapped around its neck. Then the sturdy vine split open, and a fanged mouth bit its neck in two.

Blood went spraying, and the five- or six-meter-long bird's body was split into two. Tiny feathers and bits of down fell all over the ground.

Holding the backpack in his arms, An Zhe fell to the ground together with the feathers. He got to his feet, stepping upon the rotting ground that overflowed with black water. After staggering a few steps, he looked up and watched as the bird was devoured by thousands of vines.

Satisfied, the vines scattered.

The dense vegetation, vines within the forest, and giant mushrooms blocked out the sunlight as well as the sounds of combat.

This was the Abyss, a place where a human could be eaten and the bones wouldn't be regurgitated. There were no rodent-class or arthropod-class creatures here because they were too weak. But those creatures that were hundreds of times stronger than them were by no means invincible either—the soil of the Abyss was rich in nutrition because it was saturated with flesh and blood, which may have been the reason why mushrooms could flourish.

Across uneven terrain, An Zhe walked in. The ground that was covered with moss, dead branches and fallen leaves was too soft and close to the swamp, so when animals moved over it, they made no noise.

He clearly felt that the Abyss's atmosphere had changed. Usually, slaughter and fights happened at any given moment and powerful monsters often roamed the jungles to inspect their territories, but throughout his entire journey today, he only ran into a silently slithering python.

They seemed to have all gone into hibernation.

But An Zhe paid no heed to the comings and goings of the monsters.

He blankly stared at this boundless place where not even sunlight could shine in.

To his left was a dark red mushroom ten meters tall, settled amidst several massive rocks. Mucus that smelled like blood continually oozed from its cap, and its giant body seemed to breathe, rising and falling in the air.

An Zhe laid a finger against its stem and felt it get wrapped up by the mucus.

He had never seen a mushroom like this before.

Fear suddenly filled the expression in his eyes, and he averted his gaze to look elsewhere. Just then, his pupils dilated, his body went cold, and he began to tremble.

He didn't recognize where he was.

He did not recognize this place.

Then, heaving for breath, he sprinted pell-mell through the jungle. This was the Abyss. The blood-soaked soil, the waterlogged swamp, the monsters lurking in the dark—the Abyss was still the Abyss, but it was no longer the familiar place from his memories.

The Abyss was so big, just what did he have to do to find the place from before?

He strove to think back, but he could only remember those distinctive mushrooms. Back then, he relied on them to remember his route.

So he kept walking and searched constantly, using both his legs and his hyphae. Night came after day, and after night came morning again, but every single plain seemed familiar, and every single cave was utterly empty.

There were no clues and no familiar places whatsoever. He didn't remember how many times he'd seen the sun set or how many times he'd been disappointed by empty caves.

After some time had passed, he could not walk any further. His hyphae, no longer as soft and dexterous as before, were dissolving and breaking off, and his human body was likewise weakening apace with the depletion of his life.

At a quiet lakeside, a withered vine tripped him.

A sharp stone sliced open his palm. He knelt on the ground and buried his face in his hands as he trembled all over.

He couldn't find it. He couldn't find that cave.

A mushroom's life had only one season. They would die when they got old, and new ones would grow again. The face of the Abyss changed constantly with the intergenerational replacement of mushrooms. The original road, the road he had firmly committed to memory—was no more.

Surrounded by mushrooms and dead trees, he looked at the sky in despair. He didn't know. He didn't know that things would be so—so merciless.

Lu Feng was right. He had no idea how big the world was.

He couldn't possibly find it, unless his life was as long as eternity itself. But he was a mushroom, his existence ephemeral.

He was destined to die while searching for that cave.

Nothing in the world lasted forever.

Not even the very first promise.

Salty tears trickled over the tiny bramble-inflicted cuts on his face. It hurt all over, but it was far from covering up the despair and collapse in his heart. He took a deep breath and blankly looked at the pool to his side.

He fell into a daze.

In the water, there seemed to be a voice, an indescribable frequency calling him to leave. The entire world went out of focus.

Jump, jump, everything is over.

Happy things, painful things, they're all no longer needed.

Under the bewitchment of the voice's call, he walked one step at a time to the lakeside, where the water was so clear that his reflection showed. He and An Ze looked so alike, when the ripples blurred the lines, it seemed like it was An Ze in there calling to him.

However one was born in ignorance was likewise however one would die in ignorance.

In the Abyss, in this… sorrowful place.

As though a switch in his memory had been flipped, a voice suddenly sounded in his ear. That was his own voice.

"There on the sad height," the voice murmured, "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray."

"… Do not go gentle into that good night."

"What is the meaning," he asked, "of 'do not go gentle into that good night'?"

Lin Zuo, the teacher of the Garden of Eden, replied, "Do not meekly accept destruction."

After a short pause, it changed again.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." He softly recited verses to someone. That day, they had walked a long way together, not knowing what was up ahead.

On that day, in the wilderness, bringing him along in the night, what had that person been thinking while walking amidst the sounds of the primeval wind?

Facing the impending strange fate, did that person also have the same despair in his heart? How did he continue walking?

He…

An Zhe hung his head and discovered that he had once again gripped the Arbiter's badge in his hand at some point. The badge's points and edges pricked his already bloody hand.

The illusory daze instantly fell back, and he backpedaled a few steps.

He thought, *What was I doing just now?*

Sharp pain traveled up from his ankle, for the rock that had just cut his palm now struck his ankle.

He bent down to remove the sharp gray stone jutting from the flat ground so that it would trip no other creature, but then suddenly noticed something.

There was a jet-black scorch mark on the stone that seemed like it had been made with a burned branch, forming a crooked ugly arrow that pointed southeast.

He fell into deep thought. According to his limited knowledge, the Abyss did not have creatures that could draw arrows.

And as for these kinds of strange gray rocks, he seemed to have seen them once or twice before in other places within the Abyss, but he had been single-mindedly searching for the cave, so he had paid them no heed.

He looked around and finally chose to go in the direction indicated by the arrow. He walked for a very long time, and yet another gray rock appeared, jutting out from the flat ground. Half of it was buried in the dirt and half of it was exposed, and there was an arrow on the exposed portion.

An Zhe continued walking. Not only gray rocks were marked. Sometimes, there would be marks on tree branches or white bones as well. After five days passed, he discovered that he had been continually heading to the southern part of the Abyss, approaching the highlands, where the environment was dry and harsh and where few creatures would go.

But on the same day, he could not find any other rocks.

He stood blankly under a tree and put great effort into scanning the surroundings, wondering whether he had gone the wrong way.

Suddenly, a pebble struck his shoulder.

"Are you lost?" A smiling male voice sounded behind him.

An Zhe turned around. Unexpectedly, he heard a human's voice again.

A willowy and handsome black-haired man was standing next to a tree, a gray rock in his right hand. He blinked at An Zhe and said, "The guidepost is here with me. I hadn't put it down yet."

While looking at him, An Zhe slowly frowned.

"Tang Lan?" He called out a name.

"You recognize me?" The man's smile contained nonchalant and carefree undertones as he examined An Zhe. "I haven't seen you at the base before."

"I haven't seen you before either." After double-checking this person's appearance, An Zhe said, "I know Hubbard."

The moment he spoke Hubbard's name, the laid-back smile vanished from the man's face.

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“HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE FUSION FACTION?”

"HUBBARD," Tang Lan repeated the name in a mutter. "He…"

He seemed to have lost his ability to speak. It wasn't until after more than ten seconds had passed that he spoke up again, and his voice was a little hoarse when he asked, "… Is he doing well?"

An Zhe recalled the visuals concerning Hubbard.

The insect swarms had been wreaking havoc in the Outer City. When District 6 was bombed, Hubbard had been on a mission outside of the city, which was a very brilliant move. He had not only avoided the devastation of the Outer City, but also avoided being arrested by Lu Feng under the charge of "illegally stealing the Arbiter's information." Afterward, he safely returned with his team and was welcomed by the Main City. And after that, this renowned mercenary team captain had still run into Lu Feng. Together, he and Colonel Lu had boarded the PL1109 to go rescue the Underground City Base. While in the mine, he and Lu Feng had occasionally chatted. According to Lu Feng, Hubbard and Lu Feng had completed the rescue mission and safely returned together.

He said, "He's doing very well."

Tang Lan dropped his gaze slightly and seemed to smile for a moment. He did not ask anything else and only said, "That's good."

An Zhe looked at Tang Lan.

The first time he learned of this person was in Mr. Shaw's shop, where he saw a mannequin so exquisitely made that it bordered on the real deal. Mr. Shaw had said that that was something Hubbard spent more than half of his life's savings to order—Hubbard was the most renowned mercenary team captain in the whole Outer City, and this man was his vice-captain with whom he shared a sworn friendship. After an expedition, he had never returned, and not even his body had been found.

Next to the mannequin had been labels marked with various bits of data, and the first one was his name, Tang Lan.

But now the living Tang Lan was standing before An Zhe and completely unharmed, like he hadn't been injured in the slightest—surprisingly, he had survived in this danger-ridden Abyss and was living quite well to boot.

"You survived," An Zhe said. "You won't go back?"

A hint of a helpless smile showed in Tang Lan's eyes.

"I can't go back," he said.

As he spoke, he buried the marked rock in his hand in the soil.

"I have a map, so going back is possible," An Zhe said. "… Do you need it?"

"I don't," Tang Lan said. "You aren't human, are you?"

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

Then he saw Tang Lan smile, take out a gleaming dagger, and carve an arrow onto the nearby tree branch. As he carved, he asked, "Do you know what I'm doing?"

"I don't," An Zhe said.

"After being infected, the vast majority of people unfortunately turn completely into monsters. But there's also a minuscule number of people who are rather lucky. Sometimes, they'll still seem like a human," Tang Lan said. "I'm guiding those lucky ones—I was originally guided in this manner."

An Zhe said nothing. He found that he had a special gift, which was the ability to recognize when a person wanted to tell a story.

However, Tang Lan's story was very short.

"That day, Hubbard and I got into a little spat. He wanted to continue going deeper, while I felt it was time to go back. In short, it was very unpleasant. That night, I didn't see him again and kept the night watch in another vehicle according to the rules."

"The Abyss has all sorts of things. At midnight, a powerful monster found us. I'd never seen something so dangerous before." Tang Lan finished carving the mark and put away his dagger. His voice was as clear and crisp as the person himself. "I warned them, then led the thing away in a different direction. Afterward, I died, and it must have been a very miserable death."

"But somehow, I seemed to have woken up again and also changed into something very strong. I merged with the monster, but I'm still lucid." Toying with the dagger, he asked An Zhe, "What about you?"

An Zhe thought about how to word it.

Just then, Tang Lan whipped his head around, and his gaze shot like a sharp arrow into the middle of the jungle—where rustling noises were coming from.

He said in a low voice to An Zhe, "Go!"

The moment he said that, a massive black shadow sprang out of the jungle!

An Zhe's arm was grabbed, and Tang Lan slung An Zhe over his shoulders with unhesitating strength. Then there came the loud sound of the air being rent as a pair of massive filmy black wings unfolded from his back!

An Zhe suddenly left the ground. Behind them, the mountain-like monster's claws swiped down, but the ghostly speed at which Tang Lan took flight was faster, leaving the jungle almost instantly.

An Zhe looked down. Everything on the ground got farther and smaller as they rose, and the tall mountains in the south got closer.

Amidst the oncoming wind, he asked Tang Lan, "Where are we going?"

The wind in the sky was getting stronger and stronger, dispersing his voice. In a loud voice, Tang Lan asked him a question.

"Have you heard of the Fusion Faction?"

Having spoken those words, he soared higher with An Zhe and gradually approached the peak of the highest mountain. As they approached the sky, that stretch of the highlands was dyed reddish gold by the sunset, and white buildings at the top of the highlands gradually emerged where the sky met the summits.

What initially caught An Zhe's eye were two smooth-looking cylindrical white towers, between which was a path linking them. Between the two white towers was the building's main body. It was an oval-shaped three-story building, and on either side of it were auxiliary buildings and other scattered constructs. The open space in front of the main building was dotted with all kinds of strange apparatuses, and behind the building was a piece of flat ground where more than a dozen tall wind turbines stood. The snow-white three-bladed turbines were spinning quickly in the howling wind.

A massive deep green vine that was split into more than a dozen strands surrounded the entire group of buildings, and its branches were draped over the fencing and white towers. When Tang Lan and An Zhe landed, a vine slithered over to them, sniffed them both, then left.

The massive black wings on Tang Lan's back gradually retracted into his body—while they were being retracted, Tang Lan trembled slightly and clenched his fists, a slightly pained expression on his face. An Zhe watched him without blinking until he opened his eyes again.

When their eyes first met, Tang Lan's eyes were completely jet-black, which was an inhuman look, but fortunately he recovered in three seconds.

"The transformation process is a bit messy and not very pleasant," Tang Lan said, "but I'm already very lucky."

He looked at the vine. "This fellow can't become human again."

An Zhe looked at the vine. "Does it have a human consciousness?"

"Somewhat." Tang Lan started walking, and An Zhe followed him. The strong winds on the mountaintop blew up their clothes, and they gradually approached the slightly old-looking white building in the very center.

Six o'clock in the evening was when twilight was the thickest.

In the southwestern part of the sky, clouds billowed. The huge red sun burned as it sank, its reddish-gold light illuminating the wide-open front door where a figure was standing in the very middle.

An Zhe actually couldn't really distinguish humans' ages. He only knew that that person was at least like Mr. Shaw, around sixty or seventy years old by human reckoning. But by no means did he show any sign of a stooped posture due to his age. Once they got closer, An Zhe saw that he was wearing a stiff black suit with a meticulously tied bow tie beneath the silver-gray shirt collar and that his snow-white hair was neatly combed back. Upon that face, which seemed all the more composed and kindly due to the passage of time, was a pair of gentle gray-blue eyes.

Those eyes gave An Zhe the impression that he had already seen all of the world's disturbances and changes.

"Sir." Standing before him, Tang Lan said in a very respectful tone, "I've brought back a new member."

That person looked at An Zhe with a smile. Those gray-blue eyes made people feel close in spite of themselves. An Zhe tilted his head back to look at him, and he held out his right hand to An Zhe.

After a brief hesitation, An Zhe shook hands with him in a slightly awkward manner. The other party's palm was warm and dry, and his handshake was gentle yet strong.

"Welcome to the Highland Research Institute. We've taken the liberty of calling ourselves humankind's fifth base," that person said. "I am Pauli Jones."

"You may call me Pauli or Jones, either way is fine," Pauli Jones said. With polite words, an amiable tone of voice, and gray-blue eyes that were like a gentle ocean, he was the type of best elder from humankind's stories.

An Zhe gave his own name.

"You're very young. Are you from the Northern Base?" Pauli Jones said.

An Zhe nodded.

"How did you become what you are now?"

Pauli Jones asked as he took An Zhe step by step into the white building.

The floor was very smooth, obviously well cared for. Tang Lan stepped forth and held out an arm to help Pauli, but the latter waved his hand.

"I…" There was a fluctuation in An Zhe's field of vision, and he slowly looked around.

Inside the white building was a spacious main hall. It had three floors altogether, but the middle portion of the three floors were not divided into separate floors like ordinary buildings, but connected instead. A spiral staircase wound its way up the floors. From the main hall, one could look up and directly see the translucent dome. Currently, on the railings of the second and third floors, some creatures were slowly gathering and silently looking at him from above, their gazes curious.

Altogether, the creatures numbered around forty. Most of them had human characteristics, or in other words they could be considered human-shaped—amongst them, one-third had appearances identical to humans, and one-third had the characteristics of other creatures on top of a human foundation, such as a gentleman on the second floor whose face was covered with dark gray down or someone on the third floor whose hair was like tiny curled vines that were subtly wriggling. As for the remaining one-

third, they were entirely like the monsters outside or some grotesque things, such as the mass of rotting meat hanging from the second-floor railing.

"They won't hurt you," Pauli Jones said. "If someone amongst them loses their will, loses control and goes mad, the others will control them."

The facts were as he had described them. An Zhe met the eyes of those changed humans, which were indeed not the unfeeling eyes particular to beasts. He could see the meanings within them—curiosity or examination, devoid of any malice.

"We're all infected individuals, or xenogenics, but fortunately we've retained a portion of our wills. Mr. Pauli brought us together." Tang Lan patted his shoulder. "We'll strive to keep from killing each other, then confront the monsters outside together. There's no Trial Court here either, so you can settle in without any worries."

Pauli Jones softly coughed, then said, "There is no hierarchy among the research institute's members. We look after each other, and the strong protect the weak. Welcome to our home."

An Zhe slowly retracted his gaze.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Tang Lan asked him how he became a xenogenic.

After hesitating for a while, An Zhe said, "I went out with my friend's mercenary team…"

This was a place where xenogenics lived together, he knew. But he was still different from the people here. They were humans who had been infected by monsters, whereas he himself was originally a mushroom. He had no choice but to hide his true identity. So he spoke of An Ze's life, coming to the wilderness, getting hurt, and then—

"After I woke up, I became like this." Combined with Tang Lan's story, he made up this falsehood.

"Do you have any places that differ from humans?"

"No."

"Then what you've obtained ought to be some kind of complete polymorphic mutation." Pauli gently examined him, then asked, "Do you know what you're fused with? Or can you control your transformation?"

An Zhe thought for a while, then still shook his head in the end.

"This isn't common," Pauli said. "How did you survive in the Abyss?"

An Zhe answered truthfully, "Nothing attacked me."

Pauli went silent for a moment. Just as An Zhe assumed he was about to be given a hard time, he said, "That can also be explained."

An Zhe asked, "Why?"

"The creatures in the Abyss, along with some other powerful species, seem to have another kind of sense. Sometimes they judge other monsters' racial affiliations, but not through appearance. A strong polymorphic monster may change itself into a mouse, but other monsters can still sense its tremendous attack power and will stay far away."

After a pause, Pauli Jones continued. "If they truly had no interest in you, this proves that you either fused with some kind of powerful gene or that you aren't part of their diet."

He said, "You're very special."

An Zhe murmured, "I don't know about that."

He truly did not know. The mushrooms in the Abyss were just as dangerous as the animals in the Abyss. They were either highly toxic or their bodies were suffused with hallucinogenic mists that could make animals go mad. The emergence of a weak and harmless mushroom like him in the jungle of poisonous mushrooms was already a kind of miracle—and he even had his own independent consciousness.

Pauli said, "The mutation circumstances of every research institute member is different. If you're willing, I may do some research on you. I won't utilize any experimentation methods that will harm you."

An Zhe agreed to it. There wasn't much he couldn't agree to.

Then, Pauli Jones asked him some more questions. Rather than asking further about the process of his mutation, he asked how he had lived in the wilderness, whether he had suffered, if there were any animals he was afraid of, and if he had any new behaviors after his genes changed—he seemed to purely show concern for him as an elder. But after An Zhe got a clear understanding of his own non-human identity, he was still fearful of human researchers. Afraid to get on good terms with Pauli, he just truthfully answered each question one at a time.

He also got a preliminary understanding of the research institute's status. The first floor of the research institute was the main hall, laboratory, and instruments room, the second floor was inhabited by humans with animal mutations, and the third floor was inhabited by vegetals. Each person had their own work to do. Some helped Mr. Pauli record experiment data, some maintained the facilities, some grew potatoes in the patch of land out back, and some were in charge of hunting trips—these people were infected by those extremely fierce monsters and possessed formidable strength, such as Tang Lan. In addition to hunting, they would also put down guideposts everywhere. Apart from humans, no other creatures could read the guideposts. The directions on the guideposts indicated the way home for the xenogenics wandering around outside. The scope of the guidepost placements was not limited to the Abyss alone.

Tang Lan had said that this place was connected to the Fusion Faction, but the people here were not the results of deliberate fusion, but rather xenogenics who had been killed in the wilderness and luckily retained human consciousness and then followed the guideposts to the research institute—a one-in-ten-thousand chance, the doctor had said.

The addition of new members was something to celebrate. The research institute specially prepared a welcome banquet for An Zhe, and the main dish was a soup of potato and cured meat, cooked by a short male tree xenogenic.

"Do you like potato soup?" The man scooped a serving of soup and handed it to An Zhe. His voice was slightly hoarse, resembling the sound of coarse bark rubbing together.

An Zhe held the bowl of steaming soup in his hands. He blew on it, and warm white vapor covered his face.

"I do," he said. "Thank you."

"Then I'll make it tomorrow as well." The man looked at him. "How old are you?"

An Zhe said, "Nineteen."

"Then you should call me 'uncle.' My son is about your age, and he lives in District 7. Where did you live?"

An Zhe said, "District 6."

The man said, "I haven't seen him in five years. His name is Bai Ye. Do you know him?"

An Zhe gently shook his head.

"I hope he's living a better life."

Their conversation stopped there.

At mealtime, the people of the research institute sat down in a circle, the seating arrangement disregarding rank. Pauli Jones sat in the middle, and everyone acted very familiar with him.

They acted equally familiar toward An Zhe. In the span of a single meal, at least ten people took the initiative to talk to An Zhe. Amongst them, some were mercenaries of the Outer City and some were soldiers from the base. They were either curious about his mutation process or asked about the base's current situation or asked if he had met their erstwhile family or friends. An Zhe did not tell them the fact that the Outer City had been abandoned, only replied with "I haven't met them" or "I don't know them." He felt a sort of listlessness. It was still a complete lack of news, but this type of answer seemed more capable of comforting humans' hearts than the real answer.

After the meal ended, Tang Lan took An Zhe to an empty room.

A feathered youth delivered a quilt to the room.

"It was dried in the sun just yesterday." He helped make the bed of his own volition. "It's cold at night, so remember to close the window."

"Thank you," An Zhe said. Just like the uncle who served him food today, this young boy's kindness made him feel both grateful and a little bewildered.

After making the bed, the boy took out a bright red fruit from his clothes and smiled. "For you to eat."

After saying that, he also took out a portion of dried meat that had been wrapped up. "This is from everyone to you."

An Zhe accepted it. The dried meat was very heavy. He didn't know what the living standards at the research institute were like, but in this age, no matter where, so much dried meat was very precious.

"Thank you," he said. "It's too much, I can't finish it."

"Take your time eating." Tang Lan, who was standing behind him, seemed to smile as he reached out to straighten An Zhe's shirt collar.

"We give gifts to all newcomers. I found this place a year ago, and everyone was very good to me too," the young boy said. "Being a xenogenic in the wilderness is too hard. You have to avoid monsters and find things to eat on your own. You remember that you're human, and you miss home but don't dare to return to the base. Once you come to the research institute, everything's fine."

As he spoke, he smiled at An Zhe.

An Zhe returned the smile.

The room had no wind and was very warm, and the tube light on the ceiling shone with a penetrating glow. As An Zhe held the dried meat, he recalled the month he had spent trudging through the Abyss's jungles and bogs. Unexpectedly, it was like a dream.

"Don't cry," the boy said. "In the future you'll have a home."

His tone was so certain and warm, it was like he had a boundless attachment to this research institute.

This was something An Zhe had never seen in the human base before.

He asked, "Has this place always been like this?"

"Huh?" The boy was stunned at first, but then he understood. With a smile, he said, "You'll get used to it soon."

But the moment he said that, he abruptly froze.

A keen howl suddenly came from the corridor.

Then came the sound of objects shattering.

Tang Lan furrowed his brows and strode out.

The keen howl continued, and sounds of fighting traveled over.

The boy abruptly cowered. He grabbed An Zhe's arm, seemingly seeking protection, but he said, "Don't be scared. Someone changed into a monster, but Mr. Tang can beat them."

Through the open door, they saw a human figure writhing on the central open space, densely packed feelers and lumps bulging out of his back. His facial features were distorted, turning into a gray-colored swollen mass, and his limbs attacked wildly. Part of someone else's body turned into vines as they fought. Tang Lan threw himself into the fray as well, and before long, the figure was subdued.

"Lock him up," Tang Lan said.

The thing was taken downstairs, and Tang Lan returned to the room.

"We have human consciousness now, but we don't know when it will disappear," the boy said in a small voice. "That's why I deeply treasure my time as a human."

A sound came from outside the window. An Zhe looked down and saw that on the open space in front of the main building, a large instrument was lighting up.

"Mr. Pauli seems to have been working on that these past few days," the boy said. "It looks different from his previous research."

As An Zhe looked in that direction, a glaring red light shone from between the machinery. He asked, "What is it?"

Saying nothing, Tang Lan looked out the window. At the top of the mountain, the aurora and the starry sky had become so low and so clear that it was like one could touch them if they just reached out.

Inside the room, all was silent.

After a long while, Tang Lan suddenly spoke.

"Mr. Pauli is a scientist of the Fusion Faction," Tang Lan murmured. "The Fusion Faction believes that there will be a day when they can find a way for human and monster genes to peacefully fuse. People won't change into monsters that only rely on instinct, and they'll have powerful bodies and be able to adapt to the current harsh climate."

"Just like this." He showed An Zhe his arm, which had faint impressions of black scales. "Human bodies really are too fragile."

"Later, before success was achieved, the Fusion Faction's experiment ran off. The giant leech infected the base's water supply, and half of the base died because of this—from that point on the base prohibited any similar experiments from taking place, and the Fusion Faction scientists became sinners to the base," he said slowly. "However, other research has also yielded no fruit. It's only with fusion that it sounds like there's still a glimmer of hope. So the Fusion Faction scientists defected. They left the base, wishing to find a place where they could continue experimenting."

"They wanted to research fusion, so they had to do live experiments, and once they performed the experiments, they would have created those intelligent monsters that have obtained human thought yet are not human. The base would not allow this to happen, so they constantly dispatched soldiers to intercept and hunt them down. In the end, they finally found this place." Tang Lan tilted his head back and looked at the vast starry sky. "The Highland Research Institute is a set of ruins. Originally, it was a place where the artificial magnetic poles were studied many years ago. This place

lies behind the Abyss, and the terrain's elevation is high, so armored vehicles can't drive over here. There're also many existing devices, some of which can cause magnetic interference in the surrounding area and cripple the military's aircraft and radar. Only with this did the research institute settle down. They've been taking in xenogenics while doing research all the way until now."

An Zhe asked, "Have they found a way to fuse?"

Tang Lan shook his head.

"They can't find any patterns," he said. "At first, they thought it had to do with will, and then they thought it had to do with the type of foreign gene, but it was neither. People with weak wills could wake up in confusion, or plants with weak pollution capabilities could devour people's wills. One would not necessarily lose consciousness after being infected by a very powerful monster either. The reason for retaining will is just luck. And after that, the failure of the magnetic poles and the overall pollution proved that this may have nothing at all to do with genes. Gold and iron can also pollute each other. Beneath the microscope, an iron atom inexplicably changes into something we can't understand. Mr. Pauli said that all previous research was wrong and that we must search for new ways of analyzing."

An Zhe had heard the doctor mention the exact same view. He said, "The base thinks so too."

Tang Lan didn't speak for a long time.

"An Zhe." Tang Lan suddenly called his name. "Can you feel a sort of wave?"

An Zhe nodded. He'd always been able to feel it.

"After turning into xenogenics, many people can feel it," Tang Lan said softly. "And it's getting stronger."

Early in the morning, An Zhe opened his eyes as he lay on the bed. He had a splitting headache. His dreams were all about the wilderness, with howls that shook his eardrums, the sounds of animal paws stepping in

sludge, and crying—crying from a source unknown to him. From the jungle came the faintly reflected glow of animal eyes. As though he'd gone mad, he was fleeing from something, searching for something, but he could never escape, could never find it. That massive and formless wave was still winding around him with the closeness of a man and his shadow. It seemed to be present in every nook and cranny of this world, with even the dewdrops on the tips of leaves its embodiment.

An Zhe strove to prop himself up with his arms. He sat up, but it was very arduous. It was like his bones had rusted. Not only were they unable to nimbly move, they had also become thin and brittle. Every time he moved, he wondered if he was about to stop forever, so he knew that he was another step closer to his inevitable death.

An Zhe sat on the bed for a very long time with the quilt in his arms before he felt that he'd recovered a little. He stared blankly at the warm room—what happened yesterday still felt like a dream, and only today did it have a sense of realism. In a sense, he had come to another human world. The people here were very good to him—but his original intent in leaving Lu Feng was so that Lu Feng would not personally witness his death.

Then what about the people here who were friendly to him?

An Zhe's nose prickled a little. He felt guilty, but before he could make any further choices, someone knocked on the door.

It was the boy from yesterday. He was holding a tray containing breakfast, and on the tray were a steaming enamel cup and bowl.

"You didn't wake up in the morning, and we didn't call you," the boy said. "Uncle Shu made potato soup again. You must drink it."

An Zhe gave his thanks.

With that, the boy put the tray on the table. An Zhe looked down at the bowl of rich soup. Small pieces of potato bobbed up and down in the soup, giving off a tender fragrance together with the shreds of cured meat. The

fragrance, mixed in with the white steam, spread throughout the room in curling wisps.

Strangely, he no longer thought of leaving.

Life at the research institute was by no means as orderly as that of the base. The people had no fixed duties or positions, but they had spontaneous divisions of labor. The research institute took him in, so he knew he had to give back. He wanted to work hard and do a bit of something, and the people of the research institute were all very welcoming.

At the very beginning, he would go out and gather edible plant roots with the boy in a relatively safe area. Later, his body could not withstand the cold wind, so he could only remain at the base and help plant things or cook. And even later, he couldn't do even this kind of work. The people of the research institute all thought he suffered from some sort of unidentified illness. This was a common occurrence. In this world, all kinds of illnesses could occur, and even the whole world itself was incurably ill.

That day, Pauli came to see him. From that day on, An Zhe started living with Pauli Jones in the white building to the west of the main building. Although his body was gradually weakening, his mind was still lucid enough that he could be a competent assistant. In Pauli's laboratory, there was also a quiet Indian man working as an assistant. He was good at maintaining the various pieces of equipment, and his name was Kedar.

This was a high-security laboratory, with machines all around. Screens were connected to the machines, and the largest one—its optical cable ran from the laboratory into the ground and was connected to a device called a "Simpson cage" outside.

The main components of the Simpson cage were four five-meter-high mechanical towers that were just like miniaturized versions of the two white towers outside the research institute. And as for the shape of those two white towers—after looking at them for a long time, An Zhe confirmed that they had many similarities with the base's massive artificial magnetic pole.

He then recalled that the Highland Research Institute was the place where the artificial magnetic poles were first developed.

The four towers formed a rectangle more than ten meters long and twenty meters wide. When the Simpson cage started up, the cuboid space they enclosed would be flooded with a scorching red light similar to high-frequency lasers, and it'd resemble a scarlet sea of flames. Everyone at the research institute knew to not walk into the activated Simpson cage, or else they'd die a horrible death.

From the laboratory's manual, An Zhe learned that the Simpson cage was the most cutting-edge masterpiece in the field of high-energy physics from when human science was at its peak. It directly contributed to the success of the artificial magnetic poles.

"To this very day, we don't know the cause of the geomagnetic field. Some people have speculated that it's because of the circulation of molten iron in the earth's liquid core while others believe it's the spinning of the electrical layer in the earth's mantle, but there isn't strong enough proof for either one. We don't know the reason for its existence, so we are also unable to learn the reason for its disappearance. It exceeds the boundaries of our knowledge. Likewise, we are also unable to replicate the electromagnetic field unless we create a magnet half the size of the earth," Pauli explained to him. "But one of the laws of physics we know is that magnetism is generated by electricity. The movement of electric charges produces a magnetic field."

“One of the Simpson cage's contributions was that it could show the fluctuating force fields between elementary particles, thereby analyzing how they interact and then reproducing some phenomena. As a result, we obtained inspiration for the artificial magnetic poles—you lack physics knowledge, so I can't explain more deeply. To put it simply, the two artificial magnetic poles emit pulses with special frequencies, leading to the resonance of charged particles in the solar winds. It's like we're holding a

loudspeaker and telling them 'please go that way.' As a result, the resonance and motions of the particles produce a magnetic field, and the earth is thus protected."

An Zhe nodded. He understood, but only just. His work did not require him to master advanced physics knowledge. He only needed to look after the instruments.

Sometimes, Pauli would be outside adjusting the Simpson cage's frequency with the other assistant following him, which left only An Zhe in the white building. As he sat there, the night sky loomed outside the window. The machines hummed monotonously, and the spectrometer connected to the Simpson cage drew intricate curves. An Zhe did not know what it was recording.

The curves were messy and tangled together, lacking any patterns whatsoever. For no reason, he thought of the chaotic and horrifying lines Si Nan had drawn on his paper in the Garden of Eden. Upon closing his eyes, he felt the increasing intensity of that formless wave and the day-by-day passing of his own life. He was afraid, but sometimes he also felt that he was gradually approaching eternity.

Pauli came back and began to analyze the chaotic curves. An Zhe exerted great effort to pick up a nearby thermos, then poured a cup of warm water for him.

"What are you doing?" he finally asked.

"I wish to find that thing," Pauli said.

Looking at the screen, An Zhe asked, "… What thing?"

"The thing that led to this world changing."

"It must be omnipresent. If it is in this world, then it must also be in the Simpson cage," he said.

An Zhe frowned slightly.

"A month ago, I also believed that the cause of infection and mutation had to be searched for starting from biology. It wasn't until the distortions

occurred that I realized the root of the problem lies in this world's physics laws. Thus, I restarted the Simpson cage." Pauli picked up a nearby compass. "We'll never be able to see the magnetic field, but the direction of the compass can tell us that it exists. It's the same with the other invisible things in the world. Our knowledge is too superficial, so we can only pursue the facades they project onto the world."

"Look here." Pauli highlighted a steady curve. "Everything in the world is interacting, and there's a lot of information in the traces of these interactions, such as this line. Just like the compass, it represents the magnetic field."

"We assume that the changes currently happening in this world are because of some massive thing that is slowly approaching… But the magnetic field can resist it to some extent—since the magnetic field can resist it, then it must have a similar representation to the magnetic field." Pauli's gray-blue eyes avidly gazed at the scribble-covered screen. "It's vast, surpassing our knowledge. What it's changing is the very essence of this world, but it's right in here. I think there must exist a specific receiving frequency that can see the shadow it casts on the real world."

An Zhe asked, "And then?"

Pauli slowly shook his head. "We must first know what it is before we can think of ways to respond to it."

But could it really be found?

Perplexed, An Zhe looked at the screen.

As though he knew what An Zhe was thinking, Pauli spoke.

"It's very uncertain, but…" His voice trailed off, and he sighed softly. "After all, we have also created many masterpieces that defied humankind's imagination in the past."

An Zhe sensed the fluctuation in his tone of voice and echoed his last sentence. "Masterpieces that defied humankind's imagination."

Then he saw the faint glimmer of light in Pauli's eyes gradually dim.

Pauli Jones looked out the window at the infinite wilderness and the haze-filled sky. The howls of wild animals came from all directions, and within those sounds were strange waves that could not be deciphered by the human sound spectrum.

"Only with regard to humankind," he murmured. "Before we were shattered, we believed that we had comprehended the entirety of the world."

At that moment, An Zhe saw in his eyes a loneliness that transcended time itself.

42

“THEN YOU DISAPPOINT ME EVEN MORE THAN AN ZHE.”

"I CAN'T BELIEVE that the magnificent Arbiter can only remain confined in my laboratory." Dr. Ji put the stack of materials in his arms onto the table. He asked sarcastically, "Do you need me to bring you food?"

The one sitting on the armchair originally belonging to Dr. Ji was not the doctor himself, but the Arbiter, clad in a black uniform. With a nonchalant bearing, his arms were folded and his long legs were crossed. A silver badge was missing from his chest, but the silver trimmings on the uniform itself filled in the blank space, rendering his attire and appearance as impeccable as always.

Frosty eyes scanned the silvery-white laboratory. "Do you think I'm staying here willingly?"

"I recommend that you be a little nicer to me. I'm not asking for much, just that we recover one percent of the friendship we had when we were younger," the doctor said. "You need to clearly recognize and understand the situation here. The Trial Court cannot even protect itself. If even I—your sole friend in this base—hadn't taken you in, you would've promptly been torn to shreds by the people outside. I heard that the United Front Center held three meetings in a row on the subject of whether the Arbiter's qualification to surpass all other authority and kill people, as laid out in the Arbiter's Code, should be abolished or not."

With those words, he winked slyly. "You chose to come back from the wilderness. Do you regret it now?"

He had intended to stir up Lu Feng's emotions, but failed to do so. When compared to before Lu Feng heard those words, his expression had not changed in the least.

Ever since contactless gene pollution and the composition exchanges between inanimate matter were discovered, the base had fallen into an atmosphere of desperate unease. Perhaps the magnetic poles would be defeated by distortion in the very next moment and they would become monsters, become objects, or become one with this base of iron and steel. These eight thousand people were the elites and the leaders of the military and the Lighthouse, the most exceptional of the existing humans. Precisely because of their exceptional intelligence, they were better able to sense the horror of the inexorably approaching doomsday. The dying base maintained a tense peace that was like a lake surface covered with a thin layer of ice; it appeared solid, but in fact, a single tossed stone was all it would take for everything to come crumbling down.

The cause was a shooting that occurred ten days earlier.

"If it had been anyone else, it would have blown over. You…" The doctor looked at the Arbiter, who was completely indifferent to anything he said, and gritted his teeth.

The person killed was a respected scientist of the Lighthouse. In the areas of trajectory calculation and ammunition improvement, he had made remarkable contributions—and thus was a luminary within the realm of military projects. Naturally, all the researchers within that realm supported his juniors, and the people of the military also revered him.

Ten days ago, Lu Feng and Seraing ran into this scholar in a corridor of the United Front Center, and they had even greeted each other by way of nodding.

However, right as they passed each other, Lu Feng pulled out the gun clipped to Seraing's waist. His marksmanship was as precise as always, and his pull of the trigger was both swift and decisive. The bullet squarely struck the back of the ammunition expert's head, and blood sprayed like a firework as his corpse pitched forward and toppled to the ground.

This incident alarmed almost the whole base.

Students and friends of the deceased existed throughout the base. Claiming that the deceased had a sharp mind, polite bearing, gentle disposition, and no signs of infection whatsoever, they demanded that the Trial Court give an explanation.

But a living person had died, and because the wave of substance fusions two months ago had ruined the core components of the gene testing instruments, their operations were completely halted, so no proof to support the Arbiter's judgment could be found. In this regard, the Arbiter's only statement was that he acted in full accordance with the rules and regulations of the Trials.

Many old matters were dug up, and the calls demanding that the Trial Court make its rules public reached their peak during this time. However, limited to the power granted to the Trial Court by the Arbiter's Code, they had no way of sending Lu Feng to the military court, so the controversy over the Code also reached its climax at that time as well. A young man named Colin, who claimed to be the pioneer of the original Outer City's anti-Trial movement, escaped the calamity that left only eight thousand people alive in the Main City because he himself was a teacher working in the Garden of Eden. Now, this hot-blooded young man was once again shouting the slogans that had once resounded throughout the Outer City. At the same time, he attacked the merciless trampling of human nature by the military's other institutions with all his might, and he swiftly garnered a large number of faithful supporters.

In response, after a long silence, the United Front Center chose to do all in its power to suppress him. However, the humans at the base were mainly members of the Lighthouse and the Garden of Eden. Their strength was limited, and they could not be merciless. Now, if a single person died, humankind would lose one out of eight thousand. A riot occurring in a chaotic society of eight thousand people seemed to be an unsolvable quandary.

In the midst of this tempest, a piece of little-known historical data was unearthed from the Lighthouse and spread throughout the base like wildfire.

It was a top-secret file belonging to the "Fusion Faction" from many years ago. People were very secretive about the faction's existence, but they truly did have undisputed scientific research capabilities. Over ten years of experiments and observations, they came up with an estimated probability —of the living people who had been genetically infected, they had a one-in-ten-thousand chance of retaining a certain degree of their human consciousness while obtaining monster characteristics, and one in sixty-five hundred may recover a certain degree of their human consciousness within three years of completely becoming a monster.

To make matters worse, the data was accompanied by a dispassionate remark. One in ten thousand and one in sixty-five hundred were only theoretical estimates. In reality, the true probabilities may be slightly higher.

The day this data was leaked, the entire base went into a furor.

In response, Colin wrote a lengthy essay, the topic of which was "A Hundred Years of the Trial Court—Unverifiable Sins."

At the same time, a crazed soldier hid outside the Trial Court and fired at the Arbiter. It was said that his beloved commanding officer and comrades all died to the Arbiter's gun, but unfortunately, in every aspect, the Arbiter was an officer a hundred times better than him and the bullet failed to strike true. But this action inspired others. Instantly, the Trial Court became a target in various meanings of the term.

Until Jibran submitted an application to the Lighthouse.

Dr. Ji brought up that the spore sample from the Abyss showed an unprecedented inertia against infection and being infected, against distortion and being distorted. If they could understand the mechanism via research and apply it to the human body, humans may also be able to acquire this valuable characteristic. However, this strange and lively spore displayed an extraordinary closeness with the Trial Court's Colonel Lu. When it came into contact with the Colonel, its growth speed and cell activity would both increase.

Therefore, Colonel Lu had to cooperate with this research project, and the base also had to guarantee the Colonel's personal safety, for this may be where the last hope of humankind lay.

Only then did a certain Colonel named Lu appear in Dr. Ji's laboratory.

"The estimated three months are almost up. Although there's a lack of definite proof, the destiny of humankind is counting down." Dr. Ji sat down next to Lu Feng. "The Main City never cared about the Arbiter system before, but now, just like the former Outer City, they are about to face trial. You must understand, once the magnetic poles are vanquished by the distortion, everyone will be at risk of being infected, and everyone will be faced with a trial. All of them might die at the end of your gun. Although the Trial Court has done nothing yet, it has already become the enemy in their minds. Full-scale distortion will come eventually. They hope to achieve the one-in-ten-thousand or one-in-sixty-five-hundred, and taking you down will allow them to live a little longer. It has nothing to do with your own actions, fear of death is a biological instinct."

With those words, he frowned slightly and murmured, "Over all these years, no matter how much the Trial Court had been pressured, not even a single word of the Trial rules has been divulged. I believe that you people must have reasons that compel you to be like this. But actually, I've always

wanted to ask you a different question. Regarding the Fusion Faction's data, did you previously… know about it or not?"

Lu Feng looked past him and at the spore floating in the green culture solution.

Because he was in the room, the spore's hyphae were loosely unfurled. It had grown bigger, its core now the size of a person's palm.

"Any results?" he asked flatly.

"Unfortunately, no. It's a fraud, just like that wretched little An Zhe. Its only function now is to serve as your shield, and how long it can shield you for is a mystery." Dr. Ji looked into Lu Feng's eyes.

Those eyes—those green eyes. The Northern Base was a place where Asians dominated and other people lived mixed in. Black eyes were undoubtedly ordinary, but as for other colors—even blue and brown were not uncommon, but this frosty green was really too peculiar. Sometimes he would get the impression that this was some sort of emotionless inorganic matter, just like this man's usual gaze.

It was as though no matter how many people he killed, no matter how others treated him, he would remain unmoved. There was no need to understand, much less forgive. All along, he had maintained this aloofness.

A weak frustration suffused the doctor's mind.

"I shouldn't be concerned about you, much less try to comfort you. You don't care at all." He took a deep breath and spread his hands in a shrug. "Every time I try to convince myself that you're a good person, you tell me with your actions that in terms of being emotionless, you really are… really are a fucking prodigy."

He examined Lu Feng's face—the man's facial features were so elegant and strong that it was like he was a sculpted mannequin, but unfortunately the material was ice that would not melt for ten thousand years. The situation outside was so tense that the doctor feared someone would smash the laboratory door and hurl rocks at the Arbiter in the very next moment,

but from the expression of the man himself, no signs of internal pain or torment could be seen. On the contrary, the man's slightly drooping eyelashes possessed a sedate calmness, like a ghostly black butterfly stopping to rest on the dignified window lattice of a temple.

The abolition of the Arbiter's Code had not yet been decided, so in the electronic system, the limit of Lu Feng's authority was as lofty as before. Currently, the computer screen next to him was still playing the real-time surveillance footage of the base's crowded areas, confirming that no one was infected.

In resignation, the doctor did not hold back with his sardonic words. "I'm really curious as to what expression you will have on the day you get sent to the gallows by everyone at the base."

With that, he stared straight into Lu Feng's eyes, trying to catch the shift in his mood, but unfortunately Lu Feng's attention was not drawn to this fierce gaze at all. What he'd been looking at the entire time was the spore, or the entire culturing instrument, or perhaps something in the empty space within it.

"Thank you," that cold voice said. "I deserve it."

The doctor relaxed and then once again clenched the fist he was resting on the table. At last, he dejectedly leaned against the back of the chair and said, "I should just push you out there. You've gone mad ages ago."

"I'm very lucid." Lu Feng finally turned his gaze back to him. "Does the laboratory have anything I can help with?"

"Watch over your little fungus and make it grow faster," the doctor said. "If you can, keep an eye on the research institute's communication channel for me."

The Arbiter was confined in the Lighthouse, but this fervent riot did not conclude with compromise between both parties. Instead, it worsened.

People stopped working to hold demonstrations against the base. The site for their collective demonstration was at the entrance to the artificial magnetic pole apparatus.

According to deceptive rumors, the base's policy-makers were incandescent with rage. But during this time when everything was in chaos, they no longer had absolute control. In the end, they made a great concession—the Trial Court's right to kill was temporarily removed. Although the members of the Trial Court still conducted inspections, the suspected infected individuals discovered during their inspections were not immediately killed, but taken to a military training camp at the other end of the base and imprisoned apart from each other for observation. Secondly, denied possession of firearms, the Arbiter himself remained in the Lighthouse's laboratory to cooperate with their research, unable to go out—it was difficult to say whether this was the base's protection for the Arbiter, or perhaps a precaution against him.

The atmosphere in the base finally relaxed. After all, their primary target was Lu Feng himself. As this generation's Arbiter, Colonel Lu's arbitrariness and bloodthirstiness astounded everyone. Supposing the Trial Court executed five thousand people in a year, forty-five hundred of those people would have fallen to his gun—the remaining five hundred's executions at the hands of the other Judges were because the Arbiter was not present at the Trial Court due to forces beyond human control.

After a brief calm, people began berating the Lighthouse for not producing any notable progress for many days, and Jibran, who was in charge of this project, was Lu Feng's old friend. "The last hope of humankind" was clearly a misleading lie, a one-sided shield. They demanded that the Lighthouse either produce sufficient results to convince the public or hand over Lu Feng.

"By relying on how the human population cannot lose even one more life, they can do anything." The doctor poured himself a glass of water. "Their words are deeply flawed, but this is the only way for them to give vent to their terror now."

As he spoke, he put the cup up to his lips, but his hand was trembling. Water splashed from out of the cup and landed on the table. The doctor forced down a mouthful, but then his face promptly showed a pained expression, and he bent double and retched continuously.

"I also live in great… great terror. I want to vomit," he said in a trembling voice. "A cold wave has already invaded. Winter is coming. The time when monsters are the most frenzied and most in need of nutrition has arrived."

"We all know that in the eyes of monsters, humans are but a piece of meat dripping with fat. Even when the base was at its zenith, monsters continually tried to attack," the doctor murmured with a smile. "Can you guess… when they'll discover that the human base has weakened to our current state? When will they assemble and storm the human base? … Just like how they grouped up and stormed the Underground City Base."

Lu Feng said, "Calm down first."

"Do you think everyone is emotionless like you? The essence of humans lies in their capability for empathy. Panic spreads exponentially in a crowd, like a virus. At this sort of time, the fact that you are able to keep calm instead proves the… the fearsome extent of your inhumanity." The doctor took a few deep breaths. Sometimes, harsh language could allow people to relax. He looked like he had finally recovered a little. "Please pass on this quality of yours to me through infection. When you can no longer continue working, what are you thinking?"

Lu Feng nonchalantly looked at him. "Humanity's interests take precedence over all else."

The doctor let out a resigned laugh.

After he finished laughing, he took a deep breath. Seeming to have finally calmed down, he came over to the large Petri dish that held the spore.

"They actually think that a little white fungus can save all humankind. This is the funniest thing I've ever heard. In fact, the composition of that fungus is no different from what we use to make mushroom soup." With clear articulation, the doctor repeated the words of outsiders. He resembled a strict teacher who was scolding students with failing grades. "Do you hear me? If things continue like this, they will cook you into a bowl of mushroom soup sooner or later. You must take the initiative to show how you are different from all the rest."

The snow-white hyphae trembled in the nutrient solution, and the spore slowly drifted in Lu Feng's direction. It pressed right up against the inner wall of the glass, as if by doing so it could get closer to Lu Feng.

Lu Feng said in a low voice, "Don't scare it."

"It understands, I bet it understands. Over the past several days, we've fed it countless monster extracts, and it ate them all. An Zhe is a little monster with a polymorphic-class mutation, so it must be the same for his spore as well," the doctor said. "If it didn't have its own consciousness and intellect, it definitely wouldn't escape its imprisonment and sleep with you every night."

"So what about your progress?" Lu Feng frowned slightly.

"It ate so many monster genes, but it's still the same spore. It's absolutely stable. Those gene extracts definitely didn't disappear. I surmise that it can subjectively control the transformation of its own shape, like how An Zhe could change into a human," the doctor said. "If humans can also have this kind of quality, we wouldn't be afraid of the distortions."

"You people wish to use it to infect humans," Lu Feng said. "Are you not afraid of all the infected individuals being taken over by the mushroom's consciousness?"

"We haven't yet reached the point of thinking about this problem yet." The doctor rested his forehead on the glass. "… The key point is that this damned little thing won't infect others at all. An Zhe and it disappoint me equally."

While he was talking, the spore once again floated to the surface of the nutrient solution of its own volition and climbed up slowly, then flowed out from the crevice between the lid and main part of the Petri dish. It fell down and was caught in Lu Feng's hand, where it lazily lay just like a carefree… little fellow.

Its various actions showed that to a certain degree, it was indeed a creature with subjective awareness.

"It is capable of movement and can think, but it doesn't even have a nervous system," the doctor said. "Do you know what this means? I'm a biologist. The phenomenon of distortion made the physicists' body of knowledge collapse, and the existence of this spore destroyed my body of knowledge."

The Arbiter had no interest or need to pay attention to how a biologist's knowledge was destroyed. As he held the soft mass of hyphae in his hand, Lu Feng asked, "How did An Zhe disappoint you?"

"He didn't have any infectivity to speak of, either." The doctor pulled himself together and sighed. "The bed-sharing relationship between you two—you're still a human, without any indication whatsoever of being infected. Your will also hasn't been influenced by him to become kinder, not even by an iota. Just like his spore, he can't infect people."

Lu Feng gave him a flat look, seeming to be contemplating something. Just as Dr. Ji assumed he was about to say something of value, the Colonel said, "I haven't bedded him."

The doctor stared straight at him. "Then you disappoint me even more than An Zhe."

An Zhe woke up from a comfortable dream.

In the dream, he didn't have eyes, a nose, or any of the other organs that all humans sensed with. He seemed to have gone back to a very, very far-off past, a time when he was deeply buried in soft, damp soil. But it was by no means soil. He seemed to be somewhere not far from Lu Feng. His proximity to the Colonel's breaths was even closer than his proximity to death.

After opening his eyes, he dazedly looked at the gray ceiling. This entire time, he had been trying hard to avoid thinking about the people and things in the Northern Base. He could feel the fading of his memories, having almost forgotten the appearances and mannerisms of Poet, the doctor, and Colin. Everything that had happened in that city was gradually disappearing, but Lu Feng appeared with increasing frequency in his dreams.

Sometimes when he opened his eyes, in his disoriented state, he would feel that the man was right at his side. The deep green vine leaves hanging next to the window had not yet withered when they were covered by a layer of white frost, turning them a crystalline color. It was like Lu Feng's eyes were looking at him.

But the icy chill of the outer world swiftly enveloped him again.

Outside the window, leaden clouds hung low over the mountaintops, and the hard ground at the summit bloomed with frost. Winter had arrived.

The people of the Highland Research Institute took extra care of him as always. Ten days ago, he received a knitted woolen scarf and a pair of rabbit fur gloves. Every day, he left the main building while bundled up in these warm things and went to stay in Pauli's laboratory in the white building.

The Simpson cage consumed vast amounts of electricity, while the capacity of the wind turbines was limited. Every day, it could only be turned on for two hours. The rest of the time, Pauli did other things. Sometimes, he taught An Zhe some physics or biology concepts, such as how everything was made up of molecules and atoms, and atoms could be split into electrons, protons and neutrons. However, that was far from the end. As for what exactly made up the basis of the world's matter, nobody could see it.

"If a blind man wants to perceive the world, he can only reach out and touch things, but what he feels is obviously not the thing's entirety. Our understanding of the world is as shallow as the blind man's, doomed as we are to only see the facades. We have a lot of assumptions, but we're unable to verify whether they're correct or not," Pauli said.

As he spoke, the howling north wind on the mountaintop pushed open the laboratory window. The brown-skinned Indian man got up to close the window, and Pauli Jones gave An Zhe's scarf an upward tug.

The scarf wrapped around An Zhe's entire neck. Buried in the soft and warm fabric, he asked Pauli, "Are you not cold?"

"At my age, many parts have become dull." Pauli Jones looked at him with those warm gray-blue eyes, and An Zhe could see his own reflection within them, all wrapped up in white. But he didn't look for too long before he bowed his head and started coughing. Although it was so cold outside, it was like a fire was burning painfully in his lungs.

Pauli stroked his back, then held out the warm water that was on the table to him.

"Do we have any antibiotics left?" he asked the Indian man, whose name was Rum.

"We still have some."

After An Zhe finished coughing, he took the medicine while trembling. A charcoal brazier had been lit in the room, but he still felt very cold.

"I can't find the cause of your illness." Pauli wiped away the fine layer of cold sweat from the side of An Zhe's forehead with his fingers. With pain evident in his gray-blue eyes, he murmured, "And there aren't any advanced instruments here… I apologize."

An Zhe shook his head. "It's all right."

Pauli had said that humankind's understanding of the world would always be shallow, and sometimes An Zhe also thought that his own understanding of humans was only a facade. When he had returned to the Abyss, he never expected to receive such hospitality from humans.

For example, Pauli was no medical expert, but because of An Zhe's body that was weakening day by day, he began to read the medical literature contained in the database. Rum helped with the search as well.

Sometimes An Zhe felt guilty because of their sincerity since he was not human. It was like he stole these acts of kindness while draped in a human skin. He began fearing the exposure of his original form on the day of his death.

He once told Pauli that there was no need to take such troubles. At the time, Pauli felt the temperature of An Zhe's forehead with the back of his hand and murmured, "You're like my own child."

When Pauli wasn't around, he asked Rum in a roundabout way why Pauli would be so kind to him.

Rum's reply was that Mr. Pauli loved everyone here.

"Before I came to the research institute, half of my body was broken and mildewed, and I was not lucid." Rum rolled up his pants legs, revealing sturdy lower legs that were covered with hideous scars and earthworm-like protrusions. The usually taciturn man spoke a lot. "Regardless of day or night, Mr. Pauli treated me for half a year. In the past, I did not believe there could be such a person in the world either."

Then he said, "I used to not be a good person. When I was a mercenary, I hurt my teammates. Now I've saved three compatriots from the outside,

which counts as my atonement. It's not bad to be a good person, and it's better to be a person than a monster. Many people in the research institute are like me. No one disrespects Mr. Pauli."

An Zhe clearly remembered that at that time he had suddenly thought of Lu Feng for no reason—an inexplicable association. He was thinking about how Lu Feng was doing now. Then he shook his head, driving the shadow of that guy who was Pauli's polar opposite out of his mind.

Rum was an amateur music lover. When he had nothing else to do, he would practice playing the harmonica while looking at an old music score. Sometimes he taught An Zhe as well, and the sound was pleasing to the ear. But Rum said that humans used to have instruments that were thousands of times more wonderful than the harmonica, and together, they could perform symphonies of unparalleled grandiosity.

When he said that, Pauli came over to them and said jokingly, "If Rum had been born a hundred years earlier, he would have definitely been an outstanding musician."

The always reticent Rum smiled. Then he would take out a shabby old radio, turn the tape over, and press the play button, and intense or gentle rhythms would come out from the rusty machine. It was the sound of countless types of instruments being played together, each with their own timbres and melodies that combined together to form another magnificent sound. The music flowed and reverberated in this laboratory with the burning charcoal. At the bottom of the white building, a man whose left arm had transformed into a beast's paw waved in their direction, and Rum hung the radio on the handrail outside and turned up the volume.

Airy and flowing music traveled through the window that was covered with blooms of frost. On the tape, there was an announcement before the music played. This was Beethoven's Spring Sonata. With cheek resting in hand, An Zhe listened. Springtime in the Abyss was also very beautiful, but he probably could not see it anymore.

It was at this time that he received a short message from the Northern Base.

The communication channel, which had long been silent, flashed with red light—in the address list, there was only one anonymous party.

An Zhe pulled up the communication interface. The short message sent by the anonymous party contained only two lines made up of ten or so words.

"Winter has come."

"The monsters' behaviors are different. Stay safe."

An Zhe enlarged the words and turned back to look at Pauli. "Sir."

"A message from the Northern Base's Dr. Ji," Pauli said. "Over the past several years, only he has been constantly communicating with me in secret."

The words "Dr. Ji" sent An Zhe into a daze. He asked, "… Do you want to reply?"

"Yes," Pauli said warmly. "Please reply for me."

The Northern Base.

The communication channel lit up. It was a short reply from the Highland Research Institute.

"Message received."

"Thank you for the reminder. Please be sure to stay safe as well."

The doctor walked past the communication screen.

"Colonel Lu, tsk." The tone of his voice lifted up. "It's hard to imagine that the Arbiter would do such a thing. You're unexpectedly still a good person."

Lu Feng's gaze was flat as he looked at the words on the screen.

"Who is the other party?" he asked.

"Someone you definitely couldn't have thought of," Dr. Ji said. "Pauli Jones."

43

“THAT'S BECAUSE YOU ARE OF NOBLE CHARACTER AND HONEST.”

THE EARLY WARNING from the Northern Base was succinct.

Pauli said, "They've discovered it too."

An Zhe looked outside.

The Highland Research Institute lay on the top of the highest mountain. Looking down, all of the Abyss was visible. The fault zone was like a hideous wound on the earth's pale gray skin, and the dense forests and bogs were the wound's blood, plasma, and pus. In the distance, the faraway east bank was the sea, or a huge lake. All in all, the end of it couldn't be seen, spread far beyond the horizon. During times of utter silence, whispers were mixed in with the sound of the wind, and the vast roar of the surf was faintly audible in the fog.

In short, it was like a monster silently entrenched on the ground.

This was not the Abyss that An Zhe was familiar with. He had realized this earlier as well. In the past, the Abyss was a place full of blood and pillaging. There had never been such a calm moment in it before.

A shadow appeared in the distant sky, and it became bigger and came closer before finally stopping in the sky above the white building.

With a whoosh, Tang Lan folded his wings and landed directly on the corridor outside. Then he pushed open the laboratory door.

"I've returned, sir." Then he turned to Rum. "Have there been any attacks recently?"

Rum said, "No."

Pauli Jones lifted his head and examined him from head to toe, seemingly confirming whether his condition was normal or not. If the person performing this action was Lu Feng, An Zhe would have thought that he was judging the person and deciding whether to shoot or spare them. But as Pauli's warm gray-blue eyes looked at Tang Lan, An Zhe was sure that this was only a case of a kindly elder showing concern over whether or not Tang Lan had gotten hurt outside.

As expected, Pauli asked, "Did you run into danger outside?"

"Yes, but I didn't get hurt," Tang Lan said. "I'm quite experienced when it comes to that place."

Pauli said, "You have always allowed me to rest assured."

Tang Lan smiled. His eyes were sharp and beautiful, with a faint biting chill to them. An Zhe remembered that Hubbard was the most exceptional military team leader, so his lieutenant was most certainly not an ordinary person either.

Pauli Jones asked, "How was it outside?"

"About the same as what you expected," Tang Lan replied. "They've reached equilibrium."

As he spoke, he pulled out a data cable from a drawer and connected the miniature camera that was in his hand to the computer. Up to a hundred photos were uploaded and tossed onto the big screen nearby.

At first glance, there was nothing in those pictures save for the indescribably strange scenes unique to the Abyss. It was like they were just landscape photos taken by novelty-seeking tourists. But upon closer look, they made people involuntarily hold their breaths.

The most eye-catching one was a photo of a massive lake that was taken from above. It had frozen over, the white ice having frozen the brown algae, floating remnants of limbs, and fallen leaves on the lake surface. However, beneath the vacant span of ice, a huge irregularly shaped shadow was

visible—it was an aquatic organism's back, and it was quietly staying in the water, its shadow like an abstract painting.

Right on the shore of this lake, the jungle's withered branches were enveloped in giant clumps of dull red vines. The next photo was a close-up of a vine. Its exterior was smooth like an earthworm, and underneath its skin were star-shaped radial patterns. Crowded black blood vessels seemed to be pulsing. An Zhe immediately realized that this was no ordinary plant. All the vines in the entire jungle belonged to the same tentacle monster.

"I only took one photo here. It noticed me," Tang Lan said.

Pauli took the remote control and went through the photos one at a time.

"After three months of slaughter, the ones alive now are all large monsters, and the few remaining small creatures are nowhere to be seen," Tang Lan said. "I had a few fights with them. Sir, I'm certain that right now, out of everyone in the entire research institute, only my strength is enough to escape from them. But I'm completely unable to fight them head-on. Furthermore, the vast majority of the monsters in the Abyss are polymorphic-class, and I'm not sure exactly how terrifying they are right now."

"I understand." Pauli nodded slowly, a solemn expression in his gray-blue eyes. "Supposing genes are a type of resource, they've already finished consolidating what's in the Abyss. Now the monsters have reached an equilibrium of strength between themselves, and their intelligence has also greatly increased during the consolidation process. They understand that fighting may result in damage to both sides, threatening the whole. If this conjecture isn't wrong, there must be some monsters that have already started leaving the Abyss to hunt outside of it. Humans are certainly one of the targets of their hunts as well, but it's just that they haven't noticed for the time being. We must defend against the monsters' combined attacks at any given moment."

"It is indeed the case," Tang Lan said. "But there's one thing that differs from your conjecture."

Pauli asked, "Did you discover something?"

Controlling the computer, Tang Lan pulled up an image. It was difficult to imagine exactly how ugly this image was—by no means did An Zhe have a frame of reference for aesthetics, but he was certain this image could be described as "ugly" because it assaulted people's senses to the greatest possible extent. On the crowded surfaces of two mollusks grew all of the organs that the human language could describe and the ones that couldn't be described, and they had reached out with mucus-covered tentacles to interact with the other. In the next photo, their tentacles had separated, and in the photo after that, one of the two had gone off in another direction.

"I've observed six cases of similar situations. Unlike your initial prediction, the monsters have not been each occupying their own territories and refusing to budge. They've been moving around in the Abyss, feeling each other out, and then separating." Tang Lan's tone became solemn and grim. "I suspect that the worst has happened, sir. They seem to be communicating, but I don't know what the content of those messages are. Whenever contact occurs between them, I can feel that the waves on their bodies become stronger."

He continued, "I suspect that they are feeling each other out and probing to see whether or not the other party has the genes they need."

"It's very possible," Pauli said. "As for the 'wave,' you're one of the ones with the most acute sense of it within the research institute."

"Lately, I've been more and more sensitive to it." Tang Lan's face was slightly pale. "It's everywhere in the air, and every monster's body has it as well. Sometimes I feel like even the rocks on the ground are vibrating. It's getting harder and harder for me to keep thinking. I wasn't supposed to come back so soon, but I felt the waves of my own body being integrated into them. Sir, my… my consciousness is a bit abnormal."

Pauli held his hand and said calmly, "Don't be afraid."

"A hundred years ago, in the age when biological gene sequences were the most stable, there were already some species that were particularly sensitive to changes in the magnetic field. You just happened to fuse with such a creature," he said.

"But it's not the magnetic field. I can feel it. The magnetic field is a different kind of wave." Tang Lan closed his eyes. Getting down on one knee, he rested his forehead against the back of Pauli's hand. His voice was hoarse as he asked, "Sir, have you already realized something? When I was talking, you weren't surprised at all."

He continued, "But you won't tell us because the truth is something we're unable to handle," he said. "But I truly…"

His voice became more broken and hoarse the more he spoke, and in the end he could not continue.

"Don't be afraid, don't be afraid… child," Pauli said in a voice that was like a gentle and vast ocean as he slowly clasped Tang Lan's shoulder with his right hand, "I will protect all of you up until my final moment."

Tang Lan lifted his head and looked straight at Pauli Jones. As though he were making a solemn oath, he said, "We will also protect you and the research institute up until the final moment."

"I've never made demands of any of you, but supposing the day comes when the research institute no longer exists," Pauli said slowly, "I beg you all to not join the torrent of xenogenics and monsters, but rather to go north and protect the human base."

Tang Lan said, "But the Arbiter will shoot all xenogenics. The base won't ever accept us."

Pauli looked at the boundless twilight outside.

"But even during our final moments, I'm still willing to believe to the greatest possible extent in humankind's kindness and leniency," he said.

The corners of Tang Lan's mouth twitched, and he looked up at Pauli Jones. "That's because you are of noble character and honest."

Pauli shook his head with a fond smile.

After Tang Lan left, the Simpson cage's power reserves also reached a critical value. The wide platform at the bottom of the white building shone with a harsh scarlet light and radiated waves of heat. If it was not clear that this was a high-energy field produced by machines and used to capture the vibration frequencies and interaction trajectories of elementary particles, An Zhe would have thought that it was a raging sea of fire downstairs.

The large screen in the laboratory was the Simpson cage's terminal and console, but due to defects in its design, sometimes it was necessary to go downstairs and manually adjust the levers of certain precision instruments in order to adjust its parameters.

On the big screen, the lines were still a confused mess, but they were by no means unchanging. Every time Pauli adjusted the parameters, the tangled lines would change from one kind of mess to another kind of mess.

But in the end, it was still all a mess.

Just as before, Pauli repeatedly analyzed the lines, calculated the functions, adjusted the parameters, and changed the receiving frequency. Just like that, the shifting lines danced on the screen.

Music interrupted An Zhe's thoughts. In the corridor, the old-fashioned tape recorder was playing the tempestuous Symphony No. 5. Rum stood by the window, a book of sheet music propped up in front of him. He played the harmonica while facing the score, imitating the symphony's melody. After some time, he stopped.

"Do you understand music?" he asked.

An Zhe shook his head.

Rum pointed to the tape recorder. "After listening to one piece, are you able to know how to play it?"

An Zhe shook his head a little more quickly. For such a complex symphony, it was all he could do to appreciate one-ten-thousandth of its rises and falls, much less reproduce it.

"You have to have a score," Rum murmured as he turned over a page of the sheet music.

But at the word "score," his gaze was directed at the screen in the middle of the laboratory.

As though a formless string had been gently plucked, his chaotic and complex thoughts instantly became clear. All of a sudden, An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

"The wave is a symphony," he said. "Mr. Pauli wants to work out its score. Then… then it will be possible to do many things."

Rum looked at him with his deep, dark gaze. "You're smarter than me."

An Zhe looked at the screen as well. Was it possible to obtain the secrets of the distortion calamity by analyzing these lines? His eyes had a perplexed look to them.

Or perhaps this endless chaos was the truth in another sense of the word.

A heavy silence enveloped the laboratory. An Zhe bowed his head. The fate of humankind was as vague as that wad of lines. Perhaps all of this had nothing to do with mushrooms, but sometimes he would also feel that breathing was difficult.

It was difficult to explain the reason, but as he faced the communication channel linked to the Northern Base, he placed his fingers on the keyboard.

The movements of his fingers were no longer dexterous, just like how his hyphae could no longer extend. When he tapped the keys, his fingertips trembled uncontrollably.

Without fiber optics or base stations, the cost of communicating was very high. As though he were using humankind's undersea telegraph communications from centuries ago, he had to be sparing with his words.

He sent it.

"How's the situation at the base?"

Like an absurd coincidence, the communication channel lit up at almost the same time. A similar message had come from the Northern Base.

"What's the status of the research institute?"

The Northern Base could sacrifice everything for the purity of human genes. They despised monsters, and the Trial Court showed it absolutely did not tolerate xenogenics. It seemed that only the kind scientist Dr. Ji tolerated the Fusion Faction's existence and cared about the status of things at the research institute.

An Zhe replied, "Everything is fine."

Pretending that all was well seemed to be a skill unique to humankind, and he had learned it.

A few seconds later, the other party replied, "Likewise with the base."

Facing the communication interface, An Zhe was deep in thought for a long time before he slowly typed, "Is the Arbiter doing well?"

After some contemplation, he pressed the backspace key and made a few revisions.

Right as he was revising his message, one came in from the Northern Base.

"Has the research institute discovered any new types of xenogenics recently?"

An Zhe thought for a moment, then replied, "Not yet."

After replying, he sent the revised sentence.

"Is the Trial Court doing well?"

The other party replied, "The Trial Court is operating as normal."

An Zhe relaxed.

"Wishing you all the best." He politely sent a closing remark. "Goodnight."

The other party's reply was also only one word.

"Goodnight."

While looking at that word, An Zhe lifted his fingers from the keyboard and took out the silver badge. His body's decline was speeding up, and it had already reached its final moments. With stiff finger joints, he tried hard to hold the badge in his hand.

The sound of movement came from the stairs, for Pauli had come up. Rather than returning to the room, though, he silently stood by the corridor railing, his back toward An Zhe.

An Zhe got up and walked over to Pauli. The music stopped. Downstairs, the Simpson cage was burning fiercely, and the night washed over them. From the dark remote skies came a long howl.

Pauli asked, "You aren't going to stay inside?"

An Zhe shook his head, thinking of Tang Lan's earlier words.

"Sir," he asked, "have you already realized something?"

Pauli looked at him.

"Sometimes I feel like your capacity for acceptance is higher than that of all other people," Pauli said. "You're very special. You seem to be more fragile than anyone else, yet you also seem to be afraid of nothing."

An Zhe slowly lowered his gaze.

"Mm," he said.

"But I haven't gotten the final answer yet." Pauli reached out and buttoned the first line of buttons on An Zhe's coat. "Would you like to hear me tell a very simple story?"

An Zhe said, "I would."

"It was a very long time ago, a scientist's imaginings." In the cold wind, Pauli's voice was warm.

"Supposing that you traveled through time today and arrived at a year from now. There, you traveled through time again and returned to one year ago, arriving here," Pauli said. "Then right in front of me would be two identical versions of you."

An Zhe thought for a while, then said, "Mm."

"You know that matter consists of units known as atoms, and inside atoms are electrons. In this world, no two leaves are alike, but all atoms are identical. In that case, how can you tell that two electrons are two different ones?"

After thinking some more, An Zhe said, "They're in different spots."

"But space is not necessarily a metric of location, nor is time. These two things hold meaning only for four-dimensional humans. In higher dimensions, time and space are likewise just the horizontal and vertical axes on a sheet of white paper, just like this." Pauli took out a piece of chalk from his pocket and drew a dot on the railing in front of them. "An electron moves freely through time and space. The left side is backward, the right side is forward. Now it passes through time, traveling forward by one second."

As he spoke, he used the chalk to draw a line on the right that slanted downward and add another dot. "After passing through time, it is here."

"Then it passes through time again, going one second backward, and stops here." The chalk drew a line to the left and downward, then added another dot.

Now there were three dots and two lines on the railing. They formed an acute angle that opened leftward, and the two dots on the left lay on a vertical line. Pauli drew the vertical line. "Our time is right here, at this second. At this time, what do we observe?"

An Zhe thought for a very long time.

In the end, he said, "Two electrons."

"Yes. We observe two identical electrons. But in essence they are actually one, and they're just appearing in two places at the same time." Pauli added more electrons next to those two, making them resemble countless stars. "Roughly estimating, our world has ten to the power of fifty-one identical electrons forming the matter we can observe. How can you prove that this is not the result of the same electron repeatedly oscillating and traveling back and forth millions of times on the axis of time?"

"Similarly, how can you prove that the existence of the entire observable universe is not the result of one or a few basic particles dancing through time and space?"

An Zhe frowned. He had no way of proving it, of course.

With his limited knowledge, he strenuously digested this sentence.

"So are you and I both the same electron?"

Pauli smiled warmly and wrapped an arm around An Zhe's narrow shoulders like an elder wrapping an arm around an innocent young child.

"This is but one of humankind's countless conjectures about the true nature of the world. It's not necessarily the truth, or perhaps it has absolutely nothing in common with the truth. It's just that it's difficult for us to verify it," he said. "I gave this example only to explain that within a greater metric, the brief existences of our bodies, minds, and wills as well as the existence of the entire world are even more insignificant than a single electron."

An Zhe looked into the distance. He was just a mushroom with a simple composition. He didn't have a scientist's mind, nor did he have such rich knowledge and insightful dimension-transcending thoughts. Unable to understand such a system, he only knew that this world was authentically displayed before his eyes. He murmured, "But we're all real."

After he finished speaking, the expression on his face went blank for a second. His brows furrowed as pain lanced through his lungs.

He clutched the railing, body trembling violently, and coughed up a mouthful of blood before falling forward.

With trembling arms, Pauli caught An Zhe's limp body and held him in his embrace.

"Rum!" he shouted in the direction of the laboratory, anxiety in his voice.

An Zhe knew that Pauli wanted to treat him again or search for the cause of his illness by using warmth, antibiotics, defibrillators… those sorts of things.

He coughed up another mouthful of blood, and Pauli wiped it away with his sleeve.

Blood dyed the edge of the snow-white shirt sleeve red. An Zhe looked at Pauli and forced a smile.

"There's no need." He slowly grabbed Pauli's arm, panted a few times, and said softly, "… There's really no need."

Pauli held him in an iron grip. "Hang in there a little longer."

"I…" As An Zhe looked into his eyes, he seemed to catch sight of the boundless sea and sky.

He was actually fine, for he hadn't yet reached his weakest moments. At least he could still move, and his thoughts were clear.

But he was going to die. If not today, then tomorrow—he could die just like this. Pauli was the best elder in the world. He regarded An Zhe as a beloved child, treating him so well… At the end of his life, he could die with such a gentle love, something that the other people of this age dared not even dream of. But if he died like this, Pauli would accept his arbitrary death. Unable to find the cause of illness, he could do nothing to help. An Zhe knew that for humankind's scientists, such unsolvable problems and inexplicable truths were the most profound frustrations.

He could also die as a monster. He wasn't afraid that Pauli would abhor him. What Pauli had given him was already enough, more than enough.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry." He looked at Pauli. After making that decision, he relaxed a lot. The pain in his body was nothing. He said again, "I'm sorry, Pauli."

Pauli gazed at him.

"I…" An Zhe smiled. He coughed a few times, and tears slid down, the exact same temperature as blood. Strenuously gasping for breath, he said to Pauli, "I… lied to you. I'm not a human infected by a monster. I was originally a monster. I'm not human, I just… just ate a human's genes. I just… look like a human."

Pauli seemed stunned for a second. Then a more gentle sorrow showed in his gray-blue eyes. "No matter what you are, hang in there a little longer, okay?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"I'm not sick," he said. "My lifespan… is just this long. It can't be changed… You don't need to help me anymore."

After he finished speaking, Pauli held him tight. As they looked at each other, they fell into a sorrowful silence.

Compared to illnesses or injuries, the fixed lifespan of a creature was something even more inexorable. The end was determined from the moment of birth. Nobody could step over that threshold, the threshold set by God—if God truly existed.

In the oppressive silence, the chilly wind howled, and An Zhe heard Pauli say something amidst the sound.

The moment the words reached his ears, his heart abruptly quivered. What he said was so familiar, familiar to the point where it was like he had returned to that night three months ago when he was facing Lu Feng. The wind was strong that day as well.

Pauli Jones asked, "What's that in your hand?"

Facing him, An Zhe had nothing else to hide. He slowly uncurled his fingers.

A silver badge lay quietly in his hand. This was the token that proved the Arbiter's identity.

Pauli's gaze landed on the badge, and An Zhe swore that he saw in those gray-blue eyes a distant grief.

Then Pauli Jones retrieved something from his own jacket's inner pocket and held it in the palm of his hand.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

It was also a silver badge.

A nearly identical badge.

"You…" An Zhe was stunned. "You're… an Arbiter?"

"Once upon a time," Pauli murmured. "I'm a defector."

44

“THE AURORA LIT UP THE ABYSS.”

"I AM willing to take up arms for the safety of humankind.

I will grant a fair judgment to every compatriot.

Although wrong, it is still correct."

Pauli recited the words slowly.

"The Pledge of the Trial Court," he said.

An Zhe was stupefied. He had once heard the final line of this pledge.

After coughing up those two mouthfuls of blood, his body unexpectedly became lighter, and his senses gradually dulled. Winter's fierce wind blew into his face, but it no longer made him shiver with cold. It was a kind of ethereal airiness, as though he was about to scatter in the wind. He once again propped himself up. Leaning against the railing, he looked down at the two badges.

The hexagon-shaped badge was engraved with a design. The Trial Court's insignia was made up of two intersecting prismatic four-pointed stars, resembling the icon on a map that indicated directions. The star that pointed north, south, east, and west was slightly bigger, and the arm that pointed south was elongated, forming a cross-like shape. The star that pointed northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest was slightly smaller and hidden beneath the other star.

An Zhe had examined this distinctively pointed shape many a time. Its cold silvery texture, sharp points, and straight lines all displayed

breathtaking severity and impartiality.

Pauli's fingers stroked the four-pointed star's surface. Perhaps he had traced its shape many a time, for the design on the badge bore deep traces of wear and tear.

"Its artwork was drawn by one of my colleagues." In the howling cold wind, Pauli looked into the distant night sky. "We had hoped that the four-pointed star would point humankind in the correct direction like a compass."

"Weren't you… a scientist of the Fusion Faction?" he asked in a low voice.

"I was," Pauli said.

His tone of voice was soft, just like a sigh. "I was the leader of the Fusion Faction as well as the founder of the Trial Court. The Fusion Faction was the Trial Court's predecessor."

An Zhe suddenly remembered that in the Trial Court's long, long corridor, the portraits and birth and death dates of all the Arbiters were lined up in a row. The picture frame at the end, however, had been removed and the name and birth and death dates had been scraped off, leaving behind only a blurry "P." That was the record of the first Arbiter, but for some unknown reason it had been expunged by those who came after.

The Northern Base was a place where various ethnic groups mingled. He didn't know which language the word "Polly" was transliterated from, but he could vaguely spell out the similar word "Polly" with letters.

But his impression was that the ideologies of the Fusion Faction and the Trial Court were poles apart and completely incompatible. One hoped for humans and monsters to safely fuse, while the other mercilessly killed all fused xenogenics that tried to enter the base. The two sides were as far apart as the sky and the earth. He was so doubtful that he didn't know what he ought to ask about first. Pauli said, "It was a coincidental thing."

In the past, An Zhe had heard many people recount the history of the base. Those calm narrations were like limited rays of light, and he lifted the light to illuminate every corner of the dark room so as to piece together the full view of it.

"It seemed that the ability to maintain one's will post-infection only depended on chance. But we still believed that everything in nature had traces that could be followed. It's just that our capabilities were limited and that we hadn't yet glimpsed the patterns within. We were constantly doing research, going deeper and becoming more frenzied in that area." At that point, Pauli had closed his eyes a little, and a faint pain appeared in his expression as he remembered. "An experimental subject's body divided into two for reasons unexplained, but the halves had a unified consciousness. One of the two escaped the laboratory while the other remained in the observation room. Because it looked like it had stayed there the entire time, we didn't discover the anomaly in time, and the half that escaped caused a tragic disaster."

An Zhe knew about the disaster. A leech had polluted the water source of the entire Outer City.

"The entirety of the Outer City was exposed, and the base had to distinguish humans from xenogenics and promptly eliminate the latter. The Fusion Faction was to blame for this calamity. However, the ones who researched infection and mutation and were the most familiar with the differences between monsters, xenogenics, and humans were us as well," Pauli said.

In an instant, An Zhe came to a realization. At the very beginning, the Trial Court was not one of the military's organizations. It used to be under the Lighthouse's jurisdiction.

"All the experimental projects were discontinued, the samples were destroyed, and the experimental subject was killed, but the base still gave the Fusion Faction the chance to atone for its sins. We set up the Trial Court

overnight, drafted the Trial rules, and tried the entire city. Over those ten days, we killed half of the base's population," Pauli said slowly. "The infection was controlled, and the purity of human genes was preserved. And after that—the Trial system continued in that manner. The annihilation of the Virginia base served as further proof of its correctness."

"I was part of the Fusion Faction for ten years and the Arbiter for four years." Pauli spoke those words slowly. A shadow of a smile appeared on his face, but that smile seemed more like a soundless wail of anguish, a grimace of pain. "My original intent was to have everyone be able to achieve a peaceful life, but instead I slaughtered my compatriots every day. Over each day of those fourteen years, my sins became increasingly deep."

An Zhe said, "But you also protected the base."

"By no means was that the case," Pauli said. "I indiscriminately killed innocents every day."

"You drafted rules and followed the procedures, so you wouldn't have indiscriminately killed innocents," An Zhe said, defending him.

Pauli's reply landed like a thunderclap.

"There were no Trial rules," he said flatly.

An Zhe's expression went blank for a second, for he had a hard time digesting the information in that sentence. With difficulty, he asked, "There… weren't?"

"To be exact, there were no rules that would identify xenogenics with a hundred percent accuracy." Pauli sounded like he was sighing. "We drafted the Trial rules using the results of our lifelong research. From various aspects—appearance, movements, and thoughts—we could determine its species through the distinct reactions of creatures to external information, but there was no way to guarantee that it was absolutely correct. In truth, the rules could only identify eighty percent of xenogenics. For the remaining twenty percent, we could only rely on experience and intuition,

along with… expanding the scope of execution. It was better to kill mistakenly than let a xenogenic through."

"The first ironclad rule of the true Trial rules was that under no circumstances were they to be shared with the outside world. By no means did we really follow those rules. For the sake of absolute safety, the Trial Court has always left room for mistaken kills." Pauli's voice gradually darkened. "When I guarded the gate to the Outer City, every time I executed someone, there was an eighty percent chance that it was a real xenogenic. For the remaining twenty percent, I knew full well that they were most likely a real human, but I shot them anyway just to be sure. And among those xenogenics, there was the one-in-ten-thousand chance of someone having human consciousness and the one-in-sixty-five-hundred chance of someone recovering their human consciousness many years later."

His voice grew hoarse. "To this day, it's difficult for me to recall those four years."

An Zhe imagined that sort of spectacle, and he imagined himself as a Judge.

He asked, "So you left the base?"

"I couldn't contend with my inner suffering. In the war between humans and xenogenics, I couldn't endure to the end." Pauli looked up at the night sky. After a long silence, he said, "At first, I suffered because I was killing my compatriots, but later, even the deaths of xenogenics were hard to bear. I had been interacting with them for too long, and I knew that every monster had its own life. My hands were drenched in blood. I was a guilty man. Later, I defected from the base with a handful of my colleagues and came to the Highland Research Institute, where we quietly continued the Fusion Faction's research and accepted xenogenics. Throughout my life, I've been atoning for my own sins. From then to now, a hundred years have passed. ”

A hundred years.

An Zhe looked at Pauli, his expression slightly doubtful.

As if understanding his doubt, Pauli smiled. "I've lived for too long."

"In the wilderness, the most unavoidable thing is infection." Pauli rolled up his sleeve. On the skin of his right arm, there was a patch of messy black lines. "I had been accidentally injured and infected by a member of the research institute. Before losing consciousness, I left them."

"However, perhaps because the person who infected me was lucid or perhaps because chance favored me, I woke up." With those words, Pauli smiled. "I thought that only a few seconds had passed, but it had actually been several decades. It was like my consciousness had instantly traveled through time and space. Can you guess where I was?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"I was still at the research institute," Pauli said. "They had brought me back. Even though I was a mindless monster at the time, they didn't abandon me. I had once protected them, so they protected me as well. The sentiments between humans are just like that. What you give, you will get. In this age, trust between humans is something even more precious than life itself, but I had received it."

An Zhe looked at the warm and peaceful expression in Pauli's eyes. It wasn't until now that he understood why there would be such deep bonds between Pauli and the other members of the research institute.

"I don't regret leaving the base back then, but I can also never forgive my own evasion or my powerlessness," Pauli finally said.

An Zhe said, "Because you are of noble character." After doing some thinking, he added, "Because you're too kind."

It was only because Pauli loved every single person that he would suffer like that. If they were in an age of peace, he would definitely be someone who could not bear to kill even ants—yet such a person had to raise a gun against his compatriots.

"Kindness… kindness is humankind's most notable weakness," Pauli said. "Kindness to oneself is the starting point of selfish desires, and

kindness to others is the cause of wavering belief. I couldn't achieve complete indifference or true neutrality, so I was not a qualified Arbiter."

After he finished speaking, they were silent for a long time.

But while thinking on Pauli's words, An Zhe frowned slightly, for he had thought of someone.

"But a Judge once said something to me," An Zhe murmured. "The source of the Arbiter's beliefs was not indifference, but kindness. Kindness not to individuals, but to the fate of all humankind. If one were to steadfastly believe that humankind's interests take precedence over all else, they will not waver."

As Pauli looked at him, he asked softly, "How can one steadfastly believe?"

"And supposing one does not harbor kindness toward every single person," he asked, each word clearly pronounced, "how can they steadfastly give their whole life for the interests of all humankind?"

An Zhe was stunned.

His fingers, which were hanging at his sides, began trembling. He finally knew why he would think of Lu Feng, who was Pauli's polar opposite, every time he faced Pauli.

Pauli closed his eyes, his voice hoarse as he said, "This is the cause of all of the Arbiter's suffering."

"Abandon your humanity, indiscriminately kill innocents without restraint, and ultimately be executed by the base. Or maintain your clarity of mind and eventually fall into madness as a result of unbearable suffering. These are the only two fates for an Arbiter," Pauli said slowly. "The moment the Rules were drafted, they were all doomed to meet terrible ends."

An Zhe could not describe what he was feeling in that moment. Having difficulty breathing, he looked at the four-pointed star badge in his hand.

"If… If there was an Arbiter," he said, "who has always had clarity of mind and always guarded the city gates, and there have never been mistakes in his judgments…"

He suddenly came to a realization, and his voice trembled as he said, "There's nobody who doesn't hate him because other Judges only kill a few dozens of people each year while he kills up to a thousand. In truth… in truth, it's not because he particularly likes shooting. It's because there can be the greatest reduction in mistaken kills only when he shoots."

He understood. He finally understood. With a shiver, he asked Pauli, "What kind of a person would he be?"

Pauli's answer was simpler than he had imagined.

"He would be a lonely person," he said.

Something came plummeting down, striking An Zhe's heart with the force of a tumbling boulder.

For a long while, he could not speak, not until Pauli asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I…" An Zhe's vision blurred. "I'm thinking about… about…"

He was thinking about Lu Feng.

He had once thought that Lu Feng was cold-hearted, and he had also once admitted that Lu Feng's beliefs were steadfast. He knew that for the illusory fate of humankind, Colonel Lu could give his entire life. He also knew that Lu Feng would suffer and be lonely, but it was only today that he knew exactly what sort of an internally rooted unimaginable colossus the man faced.

He once said that he understood Lu Feng, but it was only at this moment —when he and Lu Feng were many miles apart and would never meet again —that he completely understood Lu Feng.

"I know who the Arbiter you speak of is. Tang Lan mentioned him to me many times. If possible, I really would like to meet him," Pauli said.

"He…" While An Zhe clutched the badge, his tears finally began falling. "He's been the Arbiter for seven years and killed many people… Everyone hates him."

"But he was very good to me." He smiled, but the rims of his eyes felt hot and the tip of his nose was bright red. "In fact, he's very good to everyone."

"You said that you're a monster through and through," Pauli said. "But as an Arbiter, I haven't found any differences between you and humans. What about that Arbiter?"

"He couldn't be certain." An Zhe's fingers trembled slightly, and he looked at the unbroken chain of mountains in the distance. "The first time we met, he spared me."

"Sir," he said, "if the Arbiter spares a xenogenic for the first time, will he do it a second time?"

Pauli only gave him a warm look.

"He also spared me a second time. He spared me many times," An Zhe said. "Later, he knew that I was a xenogenic."

"But…" He wanted to say something, but nothing came out. His heart had been caught in a death grip. He wanted to free himself of this inescapable imprisonment, but he could not.

"I'm sorry…" He recognized that he was utterly incapable of forming a complete sentence. Brokenly, he said, "I… As soon as I think of him, I… want to cry."

Pauli took An Zhe into his arms. "Don't cry, child."

"Live on," he said. "You will see him again."

"I won't see him again." An Zhe grasped Pauli's arm like he was grasping his final lifeline amidst the tempestuous storm of emotion. He couldn't stop his tears from flowing, and in the end, he could only shakily close them and rest his forehead against Pauli's shoulder. "I wish… I wish I hadn't met him at all."

"Why?"

An Zhe couldn't say anything.

"With me, you can say anything, child," Pauli murmured. "There's no need to deceive me, nor is there any need to deceive yourself."

Choking, An Zhe cried even harder. He didn't understand human relationships, but facing Pauli, he seemed to have understood them. It was like he was facing a gentle father, a loving priest, or perhaps a lenient God. Kneeling in the temple of the Lord, he could confess everything, just like any other ordinary person—but in fact it wasn't to any other person or deity, but to himself.

"I…" He opened his mouth, his entire body trembling because of the severe pain and his mind completely blank. He finally crossed the emotional barrier and blurted out, "I want to see him…"

"I want to see him." He repeated the words almost despairingly. "I want to see him, sir. I want to see him. I don't regret leaving him, but I… I regret it so much."

"I know… I know." Pauli gently patted An Zhe's back, comforting him.

"You don't know…" An Zhe said, his words contradicting each other. His emotions were torn to shreds, and grief inundated his soul like an ocean. If the omnipresent pain of yearning killed him, he would not have felt the least bit surprised.

It might've even been a mercy.

"I've lived many decades more than you, child," Pauli said. "You're still young, and there are still too many things you do not know."

"I…" An Zhe blankly lifted his head. He could not make any retort, nor did he have any intention to argue. There really was something accumulating in his chest, unable to be grasped or seen clearly. He couldn't describe it.

He looked past Pauli's shoulder at the boundless night sky and mumbled, "What do I… not know?"

“Ba-thump.”

In the brief silence, An Zhe heard his own heartbeat. He suddenly had the feeling that what Pauli was about to say might change his entire life.

He heard Pauli's breaths.

"You don't know." In the stillness, Pauli said, "That you love him."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

In the sky, the aurora fluctuated, its deep green light like a rolling tide. It traveled from south to north, dissipating before being reborn.

He began to tremble violently.

A fierce intuition struck his soul like a shooting star hitting the earth, its glow brightly illuminating everything in the world. He actually didn't know exactly what sort of meaning those three words held, but he knew they were correct.

He was completely dumbstruck, forgetting even his sorrow as he stared dazedly at the faraway aurora. Pauli let go of him and gently dried the tears on his face with a handkerchief.

"But why would I be like this?" he mumbled.

Without waiting for a reply, he was swept up in another, more pressing question.

"Then… then will he love me too?" He looked at Pauli almost pleadingly. "Will he love me too? I'm just a… a xenogenic."

"Has he said anything to you before?"

An Zhe shook his head. Their relationship was frighteningly short. He said, "But he kissed me."

But he was by no means clear on the meaning of the kiss. That day, the power of words was too feeble, so they could only do that.

"You're still alive," Pauli said. "Did he let you leave?"

"I left him. He has always been a qualified Arbiter. I know he wouldn't spare me," An Zhe said slowly. "At that time, I only wanted to leave him

and find a place to die. But it was only because his gun fell into my backpack that I was able to return to the Abyss."

"His gun fell into your backpack?" Pauli repeated.

An Zhe made a soft sound of affirmation, and an unsteady smile appeared in his eyes. "He liked to randomly leave his things with me."

Pauli Jones slowly stroked An Zhe's hair.

"You must know, silly child," Pauli said, "the Arbiter's gun never leaves his side. This is an iron-clad rule that was established a hundred years ago."

An Zhe silently met his eyes. In the end, he bit down on his lip.

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't know."

"No matter what reason it stemmed from," Pauli told him, "he definitely loves you too. That's what that means."

"Would an Arbiter like a xenogenic?"

"I don't know," Pauli said, "But I've also lived with many xenogenics for a hundred years—if you believe I still have the qualification to be called an Arbiter."

While looking into those seemingly all-knowing gray-blue eyes, An Zhe thought that Pauli definitely knew the reason why Lu Feng would like him, but he didn't dare to ask. Pauli must have had his reasons for not saying it.

Image after image appeared before his eyes. At the city gates, a woman who had lost her husband hoarsely cursed him to die a miserable death. At the supply depot's public square, a bullet traveled through the back of Doussay's head, but she pitched forward toward him. Countless silhouettes appeared before his eyes. Those hoarse shouts, the trembling dread, the bone-deep admiration. Countless shadows rose up and surged together, reaching up with their hands. With love, hate, and tacitly understood grudges and fears piled up, they pushed him to the mountaintop where the cold winds howled, making him look down at these hordes of living things.

No one approached him, no one understood him, and his admirers would rather order a false mannequin using all their wealth than speak a

single sentence to him of their own accord.

As for… As for the Arbiter's compassion and favor, it was something nobody dared to even dream of. What sort of bone-chilling fear and unimaginable honor was that?

He was a xenogenic, something diametrically opposed to humankind, but he faintly hoped to receive it. And unexpectedly, he had received it.

At least, the moment Lu Feng put his gun into An Zhe's backpack, within the eons, there was once such a second—in that second, the Arbiter left his pistol to a xenogenic, forsaking his lifelong beliefs to love him.

Then, just like the fairy tale in the children's textbooks, the midnight bell rang, and one returned to the Abyss while the other returned to the base.

Like a gradually stopping sandstorm, as the bell rang, the dust settled. An Zhe's heartbeat returned to its normal frequency bit by bit. He had received unimaginable gifts, but he was utterly calm.

He thought that it was enough. All of it was enough.

"If there comes a day when humankind is safe and you see him," he said to Pauli, "Please… please don't tell him that I came here."

Pauli said, "No one can lie to the Arbiter."

"Then say that I've come and gone," An Zhe said. "I've gone far away, and I may be anywhere in the world."

Pauli looked at him with a gentle yet sorrowful gaze.

"I truly hope God can favor you two," he said.

But An Zhe slowly shook his head.

"But I can't love him, and he can't love me," An Zhe murmured.

"Unless—unless the day comes when humankind falls. But I hope that day will never come." In that moment, an assured tranquility enveloped him.

Countless translucent white chips of ice were born in the gaps between the aurora and the clouds. They drifted down, and the silent mountain

scenery and night came alive as a result of all the flying bits of ice. It was snowing.

An Zhe held out his hand, and a hexagonal snowflake landed on his finger. The beautiful shape gradually lost its form amidst his skin's warmth and drew in upon itself to form a crystalline droplet of water.

"I've known you all for only three months," he said. "But this is my whole lifetime."

The wind grew louder, and thousands of snowflakes blew into the corridor like willow catkins carried aloft by the spring wind. An Zhe looked up. He thought that everything from the forgotten past was unfolding before his eyes and dispersing into twinkling fragments.

The tempestuous storm subsided, the waves and undercurrents simultaneously ceasing to flow. He couldn't describe it as sad, nor was it anywhere close to being happy. He only felt that the snow was beautiful.

The joys and sorrows throughout his life, the meetings and partings, were just like the births and deaths of all the tangible things in this world. They were all ephemeral snowflakes.

"Are you cold?"

"Not anymore."

He memorized the shape of that snowflake, and in that second he obtained eternity.

The aurora lit up the Abyss.

From the laboratory suddenly came the sound of glass shattering.

45

“IS THIS WHAT GOD WANTED TO SHOW US?”

THE AURORA SUDDENLY FLASHED.

“Crash.”

The sound of glass flying everywhere tore open the silent night. An Zhe turned to look at the laboratory.

Pauli also looked at the window in that direction. "Rum?"

Mist clung to the window glass, blurring everything inside so that all that was visible was a faint human silhouette.

"Sir!" Rum's voice was rarely so excited. He smacked the window with a hand, making banging noises. After opening the window lock, his voice became clear as well, but it carried a tremor. "The screen, the screen…"

Pauli shot a sudden look into the room. Just as before, the messy lines were dancing on the big screen.

But Rum said, "Just now—"

An Zhe coughed a few times, then said, "I'm all right."

After confirming that he was still clearheaded, Pauli strode toward the laboratory. An Zhe surreptitiously swallowed a mouthful of blood and followed. His body was in a strange state, weakened and in pain to the breaking point, but it was precisely because he'd reached those limits that it seemed like he was now completely relaxed.

In the laboratory, Rum had broken a glass bottle containing antibiotic granules. Glittering shards of glass lay all over the ground, but nobody

thought to sweep it up.

Pauli came over to the big screen, and as the lines fluctuated like a ball of wriggling worms, he asked, "What is it?"

Rum's lips opened and closed. "It was clear… Just now, it was clear."

It was difficult for An Zhe to describe Pauli's expression in that moment, for it was like all sorts of excessively fierce emotions had mixed together but changed into blankness instead. Pauli's hands trembled, and he placed his right hand on the instrument's operating lever. "Are you certain?"

The expression in Rum's eyes seemed hesitant, or perhaps he was striving to remember—Pauli stared hard at him, and three second later, he said, "I'm certain."

Pauli Jones looked at the screen, An Zhe standing behind him. The research facility humans had used to study the artificial magnetic poles during the period when technology was at its peak—even if much of its equipment had been lost due to many years of neglect, it was still a functioning physics laboratory. Within the breathless silence, Pauli pulled the operating lever and adjusted the fluctuating lines backward.

He asked, "Around what time frame?"

Rum said, "Just now."

He went silent for a while, weighed his words, and said, "It was just the blink of an eye."

Pauli took a deep breath, adjusted the instrument's recording to three minutes ago, and began playing it back frame by frame on the small screen.

Those dancing and wriggling black lines varied in appearance. Some formed curves, while others were star-like scattered black dots. They tangled together in that manner, just like destiny. In every frame, their shapes changed, but these changes were irregular. After staying in the laboratory for almost half a month, An Zhe knew that what the Simpson cage captured was the interaction frequency between elementary particles—Pauli always used "frequency" to describe it.

But the complexity and disorderliness of this frequency were beyond the scope of what humankind's existing scientific knowledge could handle. Pauli strove to find a way to receive and process them so that they'd clear up, just like a person hearing a piece of music and trying to write a score for it or perhaps continuously adjusting the radio frequency in anticipation of receiving a clear signal. But for a long time, there had not been the slightest progress in this work. Facing those disorderly lines, Pauli once said that he was like a mortal wishing to hear God's decrees yet also like an ant trying to decipher human language.

As An Zhe looked at the still-pulsing big screen, he occasionally turned his worried gaze toward Pauli, and he discovered that Rum was doing likewise. In this drawn-out experiment, there had already been too many failures. If it wasn't possible to replicate the moment of clarity Rum spoke of, he would rather that Pauli had never received the information in the first place.

One frame, followed by another frame. The fire in the fireplace burned with vigor, making the "crackle-pop" sounds of firewood splitting apart from time to time. In the silent laboratory, the sound was particularly dramatic.

A ghostly image suddenly leaped out onto the screen.

Even An Zhe could not help but hold his breath.

On the dark gray background, all the lines suddenly disappeared—then what appeared were countless faint white dots that were packed together, translucent, and gradually fading into the background. It was difficult to describe what sort of shape it was with human language. There seemed to be no pattern to them at all, gathering in certain parts and dispersing in others. There were no white dots scattered in the center of the diagram, but a circle like a volcanic crater had formed around it, and the irregular dark gray circle was reminiscent of a sinister and menacing eye. It was like—like

humans in the civilized age had taken a picture of an incomparably grand nebula and then converted it into lifeless grayscale.

"I-it's this one," Rum said. "Did the machine break?"

"No…" Pauli slowly shook his head. Perhaps because his mood was excessively tense, his pupils were slightly dilated. "Such a pattern wouldn't appear for no reason. Something must have happened."

When Tang Lan pushed open the laboratory door, there were faint shadows under his eyes. He was clearly somewhat listless.

"Sir," he said. "Did you need something from me?"

Pauli said, "Were you asleep? I'm very sorry to have woken you."

Tang Lan shook his head. "I was already awake when Rum shouted for me."

Pauli asked, "Were you not sleeping well?"

"I was just thinking of coming to find you," Tang Lan said. "The wave suddenly amplified—for a second, I felt a sharp spike, and then I woke up."

Pauli asked, "What about now?"

"It's okay now."

Pauli didn’t speak for a long time, not until Tang Lan asked, "What's wrong, sir?"

"There's nothing wrong with our methods. Right when you felt the wave's amplification, an abnormality occurred in the images captured by the Simpson cage as well." Pauli's expression was grave.

Tang Lan frowned. "Isn't this good news?"

"No." Pauli said. "I thought of a problem."

In the laboratory, nobody made a sound save for Pauli. His gaze turned from the small screen that displayed the captured image to the big screen where the complex lines surged. "We wanted to capture the wave's frequency and analyze the cause of the distortion, but what if what it's currently showing is the contest between the earth's artificial magnetic field and the unknown wave coming from the universe?"

"I understand what you mean." Tang Lan jerked his head up. "The magnetic field can resist the wave, but what the Simpson cage received at the same time was both of their frequencies. They're interfering with each other."

"Yes." Pauli said. "I've always been thinking, if the magnetic field could completely resist the wave, why would genetic infection still occur here on the earth? If they've always been in a deadlock, it would make sense. The wave has always affected the earth, but the magnetic field was also putting up resistance, so we hadn't yet reached the point where matter would be utterly distorted. The frequencies of the two have always been tangled together."

"If that's the case…" Tang Lan furrowed his brows. "Sir, if you wish to analyze the wave with the Simpson cage, you'd have to wait for the wave to triumph over the magnetic field or for the artificial magnetic poles to no longer work."

"That's right," Pauli said slowly.

"But as soon as the wave gains the upper hand, matter will distort, and the Simpson cage's equipment will be affected as well."

"No," Pauli said. "There is a way."

Everyone looked at Pauli, not saying a word. In the quiet laboratory, Pauli continued, "The Highland Research Institute has multiple portable independent magnetic poles that can generate small magnetic fields with limited ranges, which is the fruit of past research. It was only because of those that we were able to survive the calamitous failure of the artificial magnetic poles a month prior."

"Supposing the artificial magnetic pole covering the earth disappears… We'll adjust the positions of the independent magnetic poles to protect the Simpson cage's core equipment and simultaneously expose the receiving area to the maximum extent—" Pauli narrowed his gray-blue eyes slightly as he looked at the raging sea of flames downstairs.

Tang Lan said, "Then we can analyze the pure wave frequency."

"That's right, that's right…" Pauli took a deep breath. The light of hope had just lit up in his eyes, but then it was promptly extinguished. "However __"

He stopped himself before he finished speaking, and the room suddenly quieted. Nobody made a sound.

At last, Tang Lan asked, "Can the wave only be seen… after distortion triumphs over the artificial magnetic field?"

He looked at the night sky outside, his voice bitter.

Pauli sat down slowly in front of the computer. Facing the communication channel linked to the base, he did not move for a long while.

"Only at our dying moment can we glimpse the truth," he muttered. "Is this what God wanted to show us?"

An Zhe stood in a corner as he quietly watched everything happen.

Pauli's conjecture was well founded. Supposing that the strange wave was all that remained in this world, the instrument may show it in its entirety.

In fact, this was feasible. Pauli was now facing the communication channel, and perhaps he was mulling over his words. So long as either the Northern Base or the Underground City base agreed to shut down their artificial magnetic pole, the truth would be revealed to them.

But what about afterward? What would happen to the two bases after the loss of the magnetic field? The calamity from one month prior directly reduced the Northern Base's surviving population to eight thousand.

He couldn't imagine the kind of struggle Pauli was now facing. This kind scientist had left the base precisely because he couldn't bear to watch the minority sacrificing themselves for the majority.

But the world seemed to be just like this. It made those who sought to survive die, made those who were kind commit massacres, and made those

who sought the truth fall into despair instead.

Facing the screen, Pauli slowly closed his eyes.

Tang Lan said, "Allow me."

"No." Pauli said. "We cannot make such an unreasonable request."

"The bases have established emergency systems. Within a short span of time, so long as they have made preparations, they will be able to survive," Tang Lan said.

"And if the apparatus gets damaged because of distortion in the brief span that the artificial magnetic pole is shut down for, what then? In the winter, once the protection of the magnetic field is lost, the environment will be even worse than in the summer," Pauli said. "I can use the independent magnetic poles to simulate a reverse force field and cancel out the artificial magnetic field within the scope of the Simpson cage to create a non-magnetized space."

"I don't understand your expert knowledge," Tang Lan said, "but the artificial magnetic field itself is a very complex frequency, so it must be very difficult."

"Perhaps it will be much simpler compared to the work from before,"

Tang Lan said, "but the fastest way is to have the bases briefly shut down the magnetic poles."

"You can't do this."

"I…" Tang Lan looked at Pauli. "I know your research is correct. You've wished to investigate this calamity for decades already. So long as you can see the wave, you'll definitely be able to find a way to deal with it. You've always been excessively kind."

"Furthermore, we're only making a request. They may not agree to it. The Northern Base only believes in human interests, and we are xenogenics. Every year, they go so far as to dispatch troops to try to eliminate us." He put his hand on the keyboard and murmured, "This is my

individual action. All… all the consequences have nothing to do with you, sir."

Pauli only watched him as though he were watching a willful child.

Pale fingertips rested on the keyboard.

One second, two seconds.

Hovering fingertips silently rested in the air above the keyboard.

Three seconds, four seconds.

He suddenly released a trembling breath.

"I'm sorry." His trembling fingers dropped, leaving a string of nonsense in the input field. As though he were facing something frightful, he took two steps back, and the rims of his eyes were red as he said, "I can't do it."

As though he had anticipated such a result long in advance, Pauli shook his head gently. "Silly child."

Tang Lan's eyes reddened.

An Zhe watched all of the proceedings from near the fireplace. The choices humans faced were often difficult, and sometimes their inner suffering would exceed their physical pain. What Pauli said earlier was correct: kindness was humankind's most notable weakness. Under the ruthless world's weight, Tang Lan would suffer, and Pauli would suffer a hundredfold. Thus, he looked at Pauli for a long time, waiting for him to make a choice amidst his inner suffering. Destiny was so fickle that even a hundred years after he was relieved of his position as Arbiter, he still had to face such a difficult choice.

It was right during this silent deadlock that the aurora flashed one more time.

Rum looked reflexively at the big screen, and An Zhe followed suit. The ghostly image appeared on the screen again, but for longer this time, with a full three seconds passing before it disappeared. The strange scatter plot was branded onto An Zhe's retinas.

At the same time, Tang Lan pressed a hand against his temple.

"I heard it again," he said.

What did it mean?

Even An Zhe knew that this meant the unknown wave coming from the universe had suddenly strengthened. As it turned out, it was not gradually advancing as the humans had predicted; it was completely capable of advancing by leaps and bounds.

After five seconds of silence, the aurora violently flashed again, like the sudden contraction of some massive thing's heart, and the entire world fell into complete darkness.

On the screen, densely concentrated specks of light were everywhere.

"It's almost here," Tang Lan said, his voice hoarse. He closed his eyes and lifted his hand, burying his face in his palm. "It's almost here. I heard it. It'll exceed the magnetic field's strength very soon. Sir, you don't need to feel torn any longer. The distortion has arrived, and it can't be stopped."

"What… what…" He hung his head. "What… did we do everything for?"

With those words, he started to laugh, and the laughter was—was despairing. There was probably blood in his throat, An Zhe thought.

Just now, they were still being tortured by the question of whether they were going to ask the bases to shut down the magnetic poles, still resenting this cruel world and cruel destiny that insisted on opposing them, and still drifting within their inner suffering—they thought that they still had the room to choose. But in the very next moment, they became aware of how ridiculous their struggles and resentments were. It had been an utterly purposeless struggle—of course, all of humankind's purposes were purposeless.

The world cared about nothing. It was neither cruel nor callous, only uncaring, indifferent. It didn't care about their happiness, and of course it didn't care about their suffering.

It seemed to only be undergoing a natural change, only progressing little by little. Of course it had no inclination to allow humankind to know the true reason. There was no need. The only ones who truly persisted in figuring out the root cause were humans themselves.

Humankind would be exterminated, all living creatures would die, and the earth would collapse.

But it didn't care.

An Zhe stared blankly at the sky outside.

After intermittent flashes, the aurora up above began to quiver madly. The green light shattered with terrifying speed into dazzling meteors that flew in every direction, and the magnificent meteor shower burned out, its remnants streaking through the pitch-black night sky.

"Beep—" In the laboratory, the machine emitted a drawn-out noise. An Zhe jerked his head up and spotted a flurry of snowflakes on the big screen.

Pauli gripped the chair's armrest with his right hand, and his age was apparent in his hoarse voice as he said, "Start up the independent magnetic poles—"

His voice was accompanied by a bone-chilling chorus of howls, none of which could be easily described with onomatopoeias from any human language. Vibrating together, they pierced eardrums. Outside the windows, down the mountain, in the Abyss—the monsters let out howls that transcended common sense.

"Flap—"

The tremendous sound of flapping wings came from the jungle, as though thousands of birds had taken flight.

They had been lurking in the Abyss for a long time, testing each other and refusing to budge.

But now that the magnetic field was finally on the verge of collapse, these horrific monsters had suddenly begun to stir.

Why?

He didn't know.

The first shadow flew through the sky above the Highland Research Institute.

Pauli went to the Simpson cage's console.

"Sir," Tang Lan murmured. "Do we still have any time left?"

Pauli said, "We don't."

"Then do you still want to continue?"

A brief silence.

"Humankind's aspirations are like the moon in the water," he dazedly said all of a sudden. "It looks like it's within reach, but in fact, it breaks as soon as we touch the water's surface."

"But when we thought that the broken moon also had value and reached out to scoop it up, we discovered that there was only water in our hands. What's even more absurd is that in less than half a minute, even the water had flowed away through our fingers."

He looked at the numerous specks of light as though he were looking at a remote dream. "But supposing I was given a chance, allowing me to still stand by the water, would I still be willing to go scoop it up?"

An Zhe asked a little hesitantly, "Would you still be willing?"

Pauli Jones's eyes were reddened, his gaze shaky, and his voice choked with sobs. In the end, he closed his eyes. "I would."

Tang Lan took out a black walkie-talkie from his pocket.

He looked at everything before him, then dropped his dull gaze and said flatly, "Prepare to defend."

46

“COLONEL LU IS CONFIRMED DEAD.”

"WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?" Dr. Ji walked up behind Lu Feng. Lu Feng stood in front of the laboratory window, and before him were the brightly lit Garden of Eden and Twin Towers.

It was only after he got closer that he discovered the Colonel was not aimlessly unfocused. He was playing with a communicator, and the still-lit screen was on the contacts list. Dr. Ji glimpsed an unfamiliar name.

"Hubbard—who is this?" Dr. Ji stood next to him, eyebrows raised. "You have a friend I didn't know about?"

Lu Feng did not answer, and Dr. Ji did not pursue it any further. In front of this Colonel, it was normal for questions to not be answered.

As he said that, the little snow-white spore emerged from Lu Feng's shirt collar, seemed to carefully examine the doctor, and then swiftly dove back in to hide.

"It's so small," Dr. Ji said with a smile.

Lu Feng pulled it out, then put it in the palm of his hand. The spore, which had originally grown to be as big as a human's palm, was now only the size of a jujube pit. It desperately tried to hide itself in Lu Feng's hand, seemingly terrified of Dr. Ji.

"I won't chop you up today," Dr. Ji said. "You've become too small. Be good and eat more of the nutrient solution, and once you get a bit bigger I'll chop you up again."

Lu Feng shot a cold look at Dr. Ji.

Crossing his arms, Dr. Ji drawled, "It's not like you're the one getting chopped up. What're you being so pissy for?"

Over the recent days, the base had realized that there was no way of explaining the reason for the spore's inertia using existing biotechnology. They settled for the fallback option, or in other words, they could only go all in and have all the researchers focus on a different direction. Today, they had finally come up with a way to manufacture hyphae extract. After the extract was diluted, the base planned to sprinkle it on the surfaces of important equipment. They were going to use this method, hoping that the inert spore would produce inert extract and that the inert extract would create a protective layer or that it would simply infect the equipment with its inertia, either of which would make it so that there would be no more worries of the equipment getting infected. After all, ever since the distortion began, even glass and wood could infect each other. Since that was the case, the extract was also capable of infecting other substances.

They had even promptly sent twenty liters of the dilution to the Underground City Base by plane.

In this regard, the higher-ups of the Lighthouse had remarked self-mockingly that science had failed and that they'd begun planning to use incomprehensible witchcraft. However, they had no other option because all sciences seemed to have failed, and nobody knew what they should place their hopes in.

Dr. Ji reached out. "Let me play with it for a bit."

Naturally, he didn't obtain anything. Lu Feng didn't even spare him a glance.

But Dr. Ji still stared at the hint of the spore's white hyphae that were still showing. "Tomorrow we can manufacture another liter of extract. It's quite a lot now. The base demanded that we first ensure that the artificial magnetic pole's key apparatus is protected."

Lu Feng curled up his fingers, and not even a hint of the spore's hyphae showed anymore.

"Don't be like this," Dr. Ji said. "Although the relationship between you two is very good, it doesn't mean you need to go so far as to protect it like it were your own son. Colonel Lu, have you noticed that ever since you came back from the wilderness, you've become less devoid of emotion?"

Lu Feng still said not a word, so there was only Dr. Ji's endless chatter within the room. He would always become more talkative when he was nervous. Over the past month, the amount he had spoken shot straight up.

Three minutes later, Lu Feng asked, "When will you start using the extract?"

"The Lighthouse is still discussing it because we have no way of ruling out the possibility that all matter will begin to fuse together after the distortion begins. At that point, the most likely result would be that it has no effect, and the best result would be that it confers its inertia to us. In the worst-case scenario, it'll turn all of our equipment into completely useless mushrooms."

Lu Feng finally spoke, his cold voice sounding like it was frosted over. "If this possibility exists, why use it regardless?"

"Those of you at the Trial Court like to strangle all negative possibilities, but the situation is different now. You know that no matter what we do, the situation will not be worse than it is now. After one more meeting, the Lighthouse will be able to decide whether to use it or not."

"Exactly what is inertia?" Lu Feng asked.

"No infectivity."

The spore emerged from Lu Feng's hand, then climbed along the uniform fabric to just below the epaulet that was on the side farther away from the doctor.

Lu Feng turned slightly, and the subtle movement revealed the vestige of something on the windowsill.

It was a small bottle of liquid with a label pasted on it, and on the label was a handwritten "mixture-III." Next to the bottle was an empty syringe.

Dr. Ji's gaze turned apprehensive.

"That's the extract of a hybrid-class xenogenic. What are you planning to do with it?" he asked. "Don't mess around with the stuff in the laboratory, it's very dangerous."

As Lu Feng looked at him, he said something that really had no discernible connection to their current conversation topic. "When we were at the Underground City base, there was no magnetic field, and contactless infections and distortions were occurring."

For a moment, the doctor didn't follow his train of thought, so he only nodded.

"Many of the soldiers who entered the Underground City together with me to provide assistance were infected, but I wasn't," Lu Feng said.

Seeming to have understood what he wished to say, the doctor didn’t speak and just quietly looked at him.

"If the spore exhibits inertia, then An Zhe would also exhibit inertia," Lu Feng said.

Dr. Ji nodded.

"But he could change between mushroom and human form. Furthermore, when he was in human shape, his genetic examination was devoid of abnormalities," he said flatly. "Therefore, if I've already been infected by him and acquired inertia, there's no way for you to tell."

"Yes, I acknowledge that. We thought of that from the beginning as well," Dr. Ji said. "But what's the point? It's precisely because we're unable to detect this type of infection that we made the decision to spray the extract over a wide range. Only when the waters ebb will the rocks show themselves. We won't be able to know whether the extract can protect humankind until the day that complete distortion arrives."

"But there's also the risk of everything turning into fungi," Lu Feng said.

"So what?" The doctor looked at him. As though he had some sort of ominous premonition, his tone of voice became more aggressive.

"Infect me with monster extract. If I'm still human after the half-hour buffer period, it'll prove that An Zhe has already passed on his inertia to me and that there are no adverse reactions. The extract will be usable."

The doctor looked at him without the slightest trace of surprise in his expression, as though he had guessed long before that he would say such a thing. As he looked at Lu Feng, his gaze gradually turned cold and weighty. With a shake of his head, he asked, "Why is it you?"

"The amount of time I spent with him was very long, and I had stayed with him in the period of indiscriminate infection after the incident with the Underground City Base as well," Lu Feng said, his voice flat. "If he was capable of infecting others, then the one most likely to have been infected is me."

"It's me." Dr. Ji let out a grim laugh and looked straight at Lu Feng as he approached the other man and raised his voice. "After the incident with the Underground City, you only accompanied him for a little while before leaving. The one who was with him the entire time was me. We slept in the same room. He was as well behaved as a kitten, we were as close as a man and his shadow, and we've had a lot of intimate contact that you wouldn't want to know about—if you could be infected, then why couldn't I?"

"You still have much to do." Lu Feng was not at all provoked by his words. He said, "You can't take the risk."

"You clearly knew this was a risk, didn't you?" Exasperated, the doctor took a few breaths. In a loud voice, he asked Lu Feng, "I can't take the risk, which means you can? Is self-sacrifice something so commemoration-worthy to you?"

Lu Feng said nothing. Dr. Ji snatched the bottle, which had already been opened, from the windowsill. Then he savagely jammed the needle tip inside and pulled the plunger, swiftly filling the syringe barrel.

"If you insist on performing this experiment, then I'm the only one who can do it." He gripped the syringe, his azure eyes frozen over and his rate of speaking extremely swift. "You've done too many things already, so you better fucking live for me."

Lu Feng didn't hinder any of his movements. He merely looked on in silence, his cold green eyes like lakes that could not be disturbed.

He lifted his own sleeve.

On the vein at his wrist, a pinprick of blood indicated that he had already been injected with something.

"In half an hour, if I'm fine, you guys can use the extract."

The doctor stood in place, chest heaving, and stared at Lu Feng.

"You… you…" The rims of his eyes reddened with fury, and his voice was as hoarse and sharp as glass being ground. "You hopeless… self-harming dumbass."

"The loss of a single scientist will have no effect on the base, but the loss of an Arbiter? Have you not thought about it?"

Lu Feng gave no definite answer.

Just then, the harsh noise of a communicator sounded. The doctor's breathing had not yet evened out when he accepted the communication. After listening for three short seconds, his complexion changed.

"I'll head over right now," he said to the other party.

After hanging up, the look on his face was solemn. "Minor distortions have been observed again, and the base has raised the intensity of the magnetic field to its maximum. The moment when our line of defense collapses is upon us. I'm going to go hold an emergency meeting, and it'll take half an hour or so. You stay here and don't go anywhere unless everyone starts evacuating."

With those words, he hurried over to the door.

"Wait," Lu Feng called out. Dr. Ji's footsteps stopped, but in his lingering irritation, he did not turn back.

Behind him, Lu Feng asked, "Will An Zhe be unaffected by the distortion just like the spore?"

"Even if all of humankind dies, he will live."

"Thank you."

The doctor left, slamming the door shut behind him.

Still standing in place, Lu Feng turned to look out the window. Beneath the aurora, the dark gray city was an unbroken expanse of jungle. The aurora fluctuated, casting its mysterious gray-green light upon the buildings.

An animal's sharp howl rang out in the city.

That direction was the city's interior, the military's base. The howl that sliced across the sky was only the beginning. A moment later, more bestial roars burst out from that place.

The military base's emergency light suddenly lit up, but it swiftly went out again. At the same time, there came the sounds of sharp whistles and explosions, followed by a high-pitched evacuation alarm that enveloped the entire base.

But Lu Feng's gaze lingered there only briefly. Then he looked at the immense wilderness outside the base.

With a fluttering sound, a massive bat-shaped winged monster took flight from the distant mountains, followed by the rising shadows of thousands of its kindred that blotted out the sky.

The communicator lit up.

Lu Feng tapped out the laboratory's number on the communication interface.

A few seconds later, a message from Hubbard popped up.

"Understood, I'll be there in half an hour."

The total collapse of the magnetic field occurred right in this half hour.

On the open country around the base, monsters suddenly appeared from the skies and earth. It seemed that they had been in hibernation for a long time, and now the moment they had been waiting for arrived. Like a tide, they surged toward the base.

The emergency lights in the corridors flashed wildly. Emerging from the conference room, the doctor hurried in the direction of the laboratory, followed by two servicemen.

"Doctor, please evacuate with us as soon as possible."

"The military cannot protect the entire base. At present, the unmanned drones have already observed that the tide of monsters is advancing toward us. Ultimately, we can only take the artificial magnetic pole as our sole defensive position."

"I need to bring something with me," Dr. Ji said quickly. "Give me five minutes. Colonel Lu is also in the laboratory."

"Please evacuate with us immediately." The serviceman with the United Front Center's logo on his chest started speaking more forcefully. "It's special orders. After all personnel take refuge at the Magnetic Field Center, Colonel Lu's presence would further aggravate the crowd's confusion and trigger unnecessary conflict. Therefore, we can consider—"

"Shut up!"

The emergency alarm sounded at a higher pitch, and the ear-piercing beeps and red light combined. This was the highest level of wartime alarm, reminding people to promptly withdraw toward someplace safe. The corridor was filled with turmoil. The howls of the monsters in the distant wilderness were clearly audible, and the experimentation staff in their white coats and the soldiers were in great confusion.

The laboratory door was near.

But there was suddenly a disbelieving look in Dr. Ji's eyes.

The laboratory door was wide open. Before he had left, he had forgotten to lock the door amidst his heightened emotions.

He strode in and saw a soldier with a black strip of fabric wrapped around his right arm carrying a sniper rifle, his aim trained on a figure standing in front of the windowsill.

His pupils contracted—black fabric on the right arm was the symbol of the anti-trial movement.

The communicator lit up, but he was in no position to pay it any mind. He shouted, "Lu Feng!"

His voice was accompanied by the crack of a gunshot.

The figure by the window swayed, then fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Dr. Ji's eyes widened incredulously and his lips trembled. "No…"

"Don't move!" The armed soldier was soon brought under control by the two servicemen who had come with him. Dr. Ji strode in. Unable to care about anything, he knocked over some lab equipment on the way over, and fragments of broken test tubes scattered all over the floor. He went around a reaction cabinet and knelt in front of Lu Feng's fallen body while trembling. "Lu Feng? Lu Feng?"

The eyes had not closed, and the limbs remained unmoving. The doctor reached toward the blackened muzzle of the gun.

His communicator flashed once more. With one look at the sender, the doctor's gaze cooled, though he had been trembling all over merely moments ago.

One of the servicemen handcuffed the shooter, then walked towards the doctor.

"There's no need to come here." The doctor's voice rang out coldly in the laboratory. "Colonel Lu is confirmed dead."

The sound of military boots stepping on the ground paused.

"We regret to hear that."

The ashen-faced Dr. Ji gave a tiny smile.

"I'm not very surprised," he said, "with regard to how the Arbiter died."

PL1109 cabin.

Hubbard leaned against the cabin wall. He and Lu Feng could not be considered very good friends.

But it seemed that their relationship also counted as one where they'd risk their lives for the other.

"It took no small amount of effort to get that thing from your neighbor's place. I'm surprised you still kept it, though."

"It was well made," Lu Feng said. "According to Shaw Scott's testimony, you provided the specific data."

Hubbard smiled and did not continue this conversation topic.

"How did it feel to be confined?" he asked.

"It was all right," Lu Feng said.

With those words, he glanced at the others in the cabin.

A nearby officer said, "We all came back from the Underground City Base together, Colonel Lu. We guarantee that we won't report you to the military."

"There's no need to thank them." Hubbard wiped the gun in his hands. "It was only a siege of monsters. We're about to partake in combat again, and your plentiful experience against the enemy in the Underground City was obvious to everyone. We don't mind working with you again, as it's quite a bargain for both parties."

The officer said, "Assuming that the Colonel is still willing to serve the base."

Lu Feng's lips curled up slightly.

"Start checking the equipment," he said.

To one side, Hubbard was cleaning his weapon, a semi-automatic gun that was entirely silver in color. His fingers rested on the gunstock, where there was a scuffed patch with "Tang" faintly etched into it.

His gaze lingered on the string of letters.

The nearby officer asked, "Who is this?"

"A friend," Hubbard said. "I've known him for thirty-three years."

"That's so long."

Hubbard gazed at the word for a long time before smiling. "It's a bit of a pity."

"How come?"

"We were born together, but in the end, we weren't able to die together."

"How could there be something so good?"

"Indeed."

Lu Feng observed their conversation with arms crossed. With his eyes half-closed, no emotion could be discerned, and the others naturally didn't expect the Arbiter to be able to empathize with their feelings.

Not until Hubbard noticed something.

"What happened to your gun?" he asked.

Lu Feng said, "I gave it away."

Hubbard smiled. He seemed to have understood everything. When compared against the military's standardized supplies, this mercenary captain was obviously filthy rich. He took out a black pistol and handed it to Lu Feng, and the moment it was handed over, he murmured, "It'll be okay."

"Thank you."

47

“WHEN YOU WALK GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT.”

WITH ENGINES ROARING, the PL1109 gradually took flight.

It was accompanied by the entire fighter fleet. Together, they made up the base's aerial combat force.

Upon the vast flatland, waves of monsters surged toward the base.

Through the porthole, Lu Feng looked northwest of the base.

Amidst the monsters' howling, the closest ones came not from outside, but within the base, where the military base was located.

Earlier, they had demanded the abolition of the Trial Court's absolute power over life and death along with the transfer of suspected mutants to the military camp for supervision. For the sake of demonstrating the correctness and nobility of the move, Colin, the organizer of the anti-trial movement, and the other core members volunteered to become their observers and guards.

So when the distortion arrived, that became the first monster outbreak site. It was too far to see clearly, but one could imagine the scene of carnage.

But nobody was in any position to care. The xenogenics that humans mutated into were nothing more than the weakest type of monster.

A slimy and grotesque octopus as tall as the Twin Towers wrapped around the buildings of the Twin Towers with its tentacles. The lights inside the towers blinked wildly, and its tentacles pierced through the glass. As it

devoured humans with its razor-sharp teeth, screams filled the air. It could be heard even in the air.

With a tremendous noise, the glass corridor bridge connecting the Twin Towers collapsed, and several black human shapes fell with the debris. They were caught in the monster's gaping, toothy maw, and the sounds of the buildings toppling covered up the sounds of bones and flesh being chewed.

"Do we bomb it?"

"Yes."

No longer in any position to care about what kinds of serious consequences it would cause, all they could do was drop bombs. If the monster was allowed to continue attacking, humankind's final refuge would also turn into ruins.

Large uranium shells were dropped, and in the mushroom clouds, the monster's body broke into countless segments that slammed into the ground. The two lofty towers gradually tilted, crashed into each other, and collapsed.

Dust filled the air.

The frenzied assault and resistance lasted for an hour.

Then they could no longer continue bombing.

Apart from where the artificial magnetic pole was, the other parts of the base had either been occupied by monsters or razed to the ground. Perhaps they had been occupied first before getting razed to the ground. Only ruins remained in the thick fog of smoke.

The monsters' sole objective was living humans.

Now, they were all aiming for the entrance to the Magnetic Field Center, which was humankind's final wartime encampment. In order to protect the magnetic pole, the defenses there were of the highest standards, forming a virtual bastion of steel.

Thus, those hordes of massive and ugly creatures that defied description securely surrounded the Magnetic Field Center and rammed their way in.

The airborne fleet could not drop even a single more shell because the light shells they had been equipped with were depleted. Now, all they had left were a few heavy thermonuclear weapons.

If they wanted to wipe out the huge monsters around the Magnetic Field Center, the aftereffects of thermonuclear weapons would level the entire artificial magnetic pole. Even if they controlled the scope and didn't harm the magnetic pole, the tremendous destructive power of the thermonuclear weapons would also directly destroy the base's power supply system and accelerate the deaths of the people in the Magnetic Field Center.

Now, all the ground combatants had sacrificed themselves.

The situation inside the Magnetic Field Center was unknown.

Except for the thousand or so people who had been temporarily transferred to the Magnetic Field Center, the base had no survivors.

And the airborne fleet could do nothing about it.

What was even more spine-chilling was that this was now the age of distortion, and distortion meant that substances would change at a fundamental level. Perhaps in the following second, the airplanes would crash, the magnetic pole would break down, or contactless infection would occur among the thousand people in the Magnetic Field Center, leading to the magnetic pole being compromised from within.

Compared to dying, personally witnessing the utter downfall of this city was even more cruel.

The aircraft fleet quietly hovered up above, like ghosts drifting away after the death of the entire base.

A communicator rang.

It was a message from the Magnetic Field Center's provisional commanding office.

"This is the Magnetic Field Center. The military is defending the entrance to the last. Half of our firepower has been consumed. Ruling out other unforeseen events, defense is expected to last three hours."

"Although we don't know why the base has become the target of a monster attack, the current situation is not something we can handle, nor is it something the airborne fleet can combat."

"Please cease the combat mission immediately, otherwise it will only burden the base's defense."

"Furthermore, we have detected that a large number of flying monsters are heading toward the base. For the sake of preserving humankind's vital forces, please leave the base immediately and find a safe place to land."

"Although we do not know how long you can survive for, please live on."

"Please immediately withdraw from the base."

The aircraft fleet hovered for a long time.

"I repeat, this is an order. Please immediately withdraw from the base."

"The base gives you its blessings. Good luck."

The communication ended.

The channel was silent. In the cabin, all that could be heard were the sounds of suppressed and tense breathing. The officers fixedly observed the blighted land below, and it was difficult to say whether the expressions in their eyes were of hatred, despair, or perhaps something akin to cinders.

At last, another aircraft pilot's voice came from the fleet's communication channel.

"PJ143 to PL1109."

"Where are we withdrawing to?"

The PL1109's officer looked at Lu Feng.

"Colonel Lu has an abundance of wilderness experience," he said.

The implication was that Lu Feng would decide where to withdraw to.

Lu Feng took the communicator.

"Highland 7, the military's six-star refuge, has facilities to support life."

"Canyon 313 in the northwest region of the central basin is devoid of strong and deadly monsters, and there is water."

"If the fighter planes have enough fuel, we can consider the Underground City Base."

He mentioned the three places in a flat tone of voice, then said, "Please choose for yourself."

"PJ179 requests to know PL1109's destination."

Lu Feng paused.

His gaze swept over the people in the cabin.

"The Abyss," he said. "To aid the Highland Research Institute."

"The place where the Fusion Faction is?" An officer jerked his head up. "That's the xenogenics' territory."

"I am aware of that," Lu Feng said.

Similar questions sounded in the communication channel.

"Aiding the enemy?"

"Won't the area self-governed by the xenogenics be even more dangerous?"

"Requesting to know the reason behind this decision."

“It's my individual decision. The Highland Research Institute is the only existing human settlement outside of the bases," Lu Feng said flatly. "Please choose your destinations for yourselves."

The PL1109's crew commander raised no objections. After a brief hesitation, he manipulated the flight controls, and the engines roared as the fighter plane slowly turned to the south.

A voice came once more from the communication channel.

"Excuse me… You are—?"

"Trial Court, Lu Feng."

Silence.

The PL1109 climbed to a high altitude and flew through the boundless night in the direction of the Abyss, its wing lights glowing.

Above the base, within the hovering fleet, a fighter plane followed the PL1109 southward.

Then a second one.

Then a third one.

In the canopy of night, the wing lights and taillights converged into a flowing river of light.

Until only two remained.

"PJ254 and PJ113 have decided to stand by and await orders. We will survive or perish with the base."

"May you prevail."

PL1109's crew commander replied, "May we have a bright future."

"Take care, and good luck."

The Abyss, Highland Research Institute.

After the magnetic field failed, the image on the screen changed.

All of the chaos had disappeared, leaving behind only a screen full of evenly distributed image noise. By no means could it be said to have a pattern or no pattern. Because it was excessively chaotic, it instead exhibited a tidiness that was hard to describe.

Just like that, Pauli stared at his screen. He was clearly only looking at the screen, but An Zhe felt that he was looking through the screen at some massive and indescribable thing.

An Zhe recalled what Tang Lan had said to Pauli an hour ago. At that time, Tang Lan had asked him if he had already realized something and just wasn't willing to tell them because the truth was something they were unable to handle.

Now, facing Pauli's gaze, the same thought sprang up in his mind.

"Have you realized something?" An Zhe asked.

In the silence, Pauli said, "Perhaps not quite, but it's frequencies."

"Frequencies?"

"Atoms, electrons, and photons. Matter is composed of elementary particles, but what are elementary particles formed from? Strings. Strings are lines of energy in two-dimensional space. It's only when they begin to vibrate at certain frequencies that they become particles in our space-time."

"The Simpson cage is a masterpiece in the field of particle physics. In the beginning, people used it to verify the correctness of string theory. Now, it may indeed be correct."

An Zhe murmured, "I don't understand."

"That's all right, I'll give an example," Pauli said. "When you pick up a violin and pluck different strings, the strings will vibrate because they were plucked, and different vibrations emit different sounds. We call those units of energy that can be found throughout the universe 'strings,' and the strings' various vibration frequencies produce different particles, forming our world."

"The reason why our world's laws of physics have previously been stable is because our strings have always been playing an unchanging piece of music. Therefore, electrons were electrons, atoms were atoms, and physics equations have always been those equations. But now—"

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly. Through this metaphor, he understood what Pauli wished to say.

"The most terrifying thing is not that this theory is correct, but rather… It's now time to change to a different melody," Pauli said. "The strings of the universe are about to be played in a different way. Or perhaps the frequency of the universe was disordered in the first place and humankind just happened to emerge during a brief period of stability. Once the age of stability ends, everything will return to chaos and disorder."

The world's most fundamental components, those laws of physics, were a symphony played according to the sheet music. Now the old melody had taken its final bows, and a new prelude was about to begin.

There had never been immutable laws, only eternal and chaotic terror.

An Zhe looked blankly out the window.

An ashen glow slowly lit up the sky.

It seemed like only three or four hours of the night had passed, but dawn had begun to rise.

"All laws are falling apart, and matter is beginning to distort from its fundamental properties. You, me, the earth, the sun, and the Milky Way. The rotation is speeding up," Pauli said.

An Zhe asked, "What will it be like in the end?"

"I don't know." Pauli shook his head slowly. "Living and non-living things will mix together, all tangible things will change, and all of time and space will bend. Everything will take on another appearance that we're unable to understand. There's only one thing that's certain."

An Zhe waited for him to finish.

"We will all die," he said.

An Zhe began coughing violently once more. It seemed like he was going to cough up all the blood in his body, with the deterioration of his body being faster than the distortion of matter. He curled up in a chair near the fireplace with his arms wrapped around his knees. Surprisingly, he was still alive. It seemed like he was destined to witness the extinction of humankind at the final moments of his own life.

Tang Lan went out. The research institute consisted of half-human, half-monster xenogenics. Some of them had a high level of combat prowess, while others were just ordinary animals and plants that were even slower and clumsier than humans.

Every arm of the massive vine that surrounded the entire research institute lifted up, its branches and leaves standing on end like the fine hairs

on a human body, in a stance filled with aggression.

Rustling shadows climbed up from the Abyss like a rising tide of black water. The monsters that could only crawl were slightly slower, while the flying monsters had already circled their way up to the mountaintop and dived down. Why had they gathered to attack the human bases only after the wave had triumphed over the magnetic field? Was there something special about this timing? Or was it merely because human bodies were weak, making them easily preyed upon?

That shouldn't have been the case.

Pauli muttered to himself, "What do they wish to gain from attacking this place?"

From the nearby walkie-talkie came the whistling wind and Tang Lan's voice. "Half of the Abyss's monsters are leaving the Abyss, and the other half are coming here. The ones that have come up first are the flying monsters."

"We can't hold out, sir. What do we do?"

The Highland Research Institute had its own small reserves of armaments. A gunshot rang out, and a bird plummeted into the center of the Simpson cage.

The glow of the Simpson cage was too bright, so An Zhe could clearly see what had occurred. Its wingtips had come into contact with the crimson lasers and flames first, instantly turning into glittering powder, and its neck arched up. It seemed to want to scream, but its body fell swiftly under the effect of gravity into the sea of flames.

Then its body completely disintegrated in an instant, and the glittering dust filled the Simpson cage like a springtime sandstorm with a crackling burst of sparks like that of firewood burning in a fireplace.

A life disappeared just like that, from its body to its soul.

An Zhe curled in on himself and took a few arduous breaths. This may not be a clean way to die, but it was better that time itself was killing him

little by little.

Pauli helped him up and fed him a mouthful of glucose water, but the flow of the warm liquid into his esophagus was also like the cruel torture of being sliced open.

He leaned against Pauli.

“The Simpson cage is a strong force field and stream of high-energy particles. It is too energetic."

An Zhe nodded. Only after witnessing the bird's death did he understand why Pauli strictly prohibited the people of the research institute from approaching the Simpson cage.

Rum, who had been staring at the screen the entire time, chose that moment to speak up. "Sir."

An Zhe looked in his direction.

On the screen, amidst the image noise and chaotic curves, several distinct white lines suddenly appeared. In a strange yet orderly way, they intertwined and slowly rotated.

At the same time, the sparks in the Simpson cage went out, and the last traces of the bird also disappeared completely.

On the screen, the lines slowly disappeared.

Pauli Jones shot to his feet, his pupils sharply contracted and his voice tremulous as he muttered, "This… this is…"

"Let me think—" Pauli threw himself at the console. As he hit the buttons at top speed, he babbled, "We must lure all the other monsters into the Simpson cage."

He put his words into action. The people of the research institute had been provided with a dozen or so simple communicators to facilitate communication. The xenogenics led by Tang Lan temporarily obstructed the outside world's monsters a hundred meters away, and Pauli commanded the ones with no fighting capabilities to transfer into the white building, behind the Simpson Cage.

The monsters were aiming precisely at the people inside the research institute. After they did all that, the target of the monsters' attacks obviously shifted.

Pauli told Tang Lan to create an opening, and a monster that had a star-shaped arrangement of tentacles yet could still fly dove straight down toward it. But the raging blaze of the Simpson cage blocked the entrance to the white building. If the monster wished to charge at the white building, it had to pass straight through it.

Without any hesitation, it chose an angle that was minimally affected by the sea of flames and glided down.

Several clear curves suddenly appeared on the screen again.

They intertwined, appearing as distinct as the long ripples in a swimming duck's wake.

Pauli stared at those curves.

When the monster's body completely disappeared, the curves disappeared as well, once again changing into irregular snow-white visual noise.

"There had been other times when monsters or xenogenics were incinerated by the Simpson cage, but the curves back then were very disordered. It seems that that was also because of the magnetic field's influence," he said. "Therefore, these curves represent the monster's innate frequency. If different monsters enter—"

Before he finished speaking, there was a dull sound. The person on the ground who had sniped the monster shot a smaller monster, and it also fell into the Simpson cage's boundaries.

A similar burst of glittering dust scattered into the air, and several lines distinctly different from the previous creature's but still clearly visible appeared on the big screen.

Pauli's breathing quickened.

"In this world formed of elementary particles, every creature has its own frequency, and every substance—every element also has its own frequency," he said. "They are independent of each other in stable waves, and they infect each other in disordered waves."

As he looked at the dancing curves and calculated parameters on the screen, the expression on his face could have been described as manic. "The frequencies captured by the Simpson cage can be reproduced with the magnetic field generator. At the beginning, this was exactly how we simulated the geomagnetic field. If we transmit a captured monster frequency, then the creatures within the artificial magnetic field will be infected by this frequency."

He said blankly, "At the very end, God has finally allowed me to glimpse a fraction of the truth. Should I thank Him?"

It was like he had received some sort of divine instruction or had an illuminating epiphany.

"Are properties and even the classifications of species themselves also strings of numbers that can be expressed using parameters? Can we also use a few words to summarize them in either a high-dimensional or low-dimensional world?"

"We had studied the geomagnetic field's frequencies, so we obtained the frequency that represents protection and resistance, which enabled us to cling to life for over a hundred years in this age. In fact, we have already come into contact with a portion of the truth ages ago."

He wrote and drew on the paper again and again. An Zhe quietly looked at Pauli from behind. Even though death was almost upon them, the truth was that important to humankind. But to him, it was meaningless. Humans used various complex theories to represent the world, but in his eyes, the world was the world. There weren't so many things to be analyzed or explained, only a complex manifestation.

But Pauli continued to talk.

"One frequency's wave covers another frequency's wave. There are strong waves and weak waves. There exist the strongest waves that can cover up everything, as well as the weak waves that have always been covered up. The wave inherent to humankind is weak, so it is easy for them to be infected by other creatures and lose consciousness."

As he watched the hordes of oncoming monsters, an almost neurotic look showed in his gray-blue eyes. An Zhe knew that it meant that his scientist's brain was spinning at a manic pace. He was handling and receiving too much information, so he could only sort out his thoughts by swiftly verbalizing them. Pauli muttered, "What do they wish to obtain? The most powerful frequency? Or have they sensed that the magnetic field generator can emit specific waves?"

"Or, or…" His eyes widened. "In that case, could there be an absolutely stable frequency?"

He seized a piece of paper that was within reach. "Jibran once told me that the Northern Base had found a sample that exhibited absolute inertia __"

He picked up the communication device.

An Zhe quietly watched.

He actually didn't understand much of what Pauli said.

But he understood some of it.

Long ago, how did he come to have his own consciousness? He didn't remember. It must have been a coincidental mutation, a trifling ripple in this vast wave.

So he came into being.

So his destiny came into being.

Then he met An Ze.

The destiny of humankind was also like a shifting and uncertain piece of music.

With a slight cough, he stood up from his chair. If he paid it no heed, the physical pain was actually a trivial thing.

Pauli heard him get up, and even though he was so excited, he still said in a warm tone, "Don't get up, there's nothing here you need to help with. Rest up."

But right away, he became utterly absorbed in his research and discoveries again.

After picking up a piece of paper, An Zhe wrote down a few words on it with a pen, folded it up, and handed it to Rum, then walked toward the door. Rum opened his mouth, but An Zhe gently gestured for him to keep silent.

Standing on the other side of the door, An Zhe gently and sorrowfully looked at Pauli through its translucent glass.

With a click, he locked the door from the outside.

The sound startled Pauli, who had been immersed in his research, and he looked up in the direction of the sound.

An Zhe turned and walked down the stairs, his footsteps slightly unsteady and his internal organs feeling like they were being scorched by an inferno.

Lastly, he threaded his way through the people on the first floor of the white building, descended the stairs in front of the building, and came to the Simpson cage's brilliant inferno.

He originally shouldn't have been here.

He was a member of the Abyss, and it was the ones currently attacking the humans who were his kindred.

But now the situation was reversed, for he stood together with the humans. They had acknowledged him and treated him well.

The curling flames heated his face, and he bent double and coughed out a few more mouthfuls of blood.

A xenogenic shouldn't have stood here in the first place.

Have I felt happiness or suffering as a result of joining the human population? he wondered.

The withering of a mushroom took time, for the dissolution of its hyphae was a gradual process. He had closed his eyes countless times, always feeling like they would not open again, but they still opened.

What was it that had allowed him to stay until now? Chance? Pauli had said that chance was destiny.

Then let it be destiny that brought him here!

The vine protecting the research institute thudded to the ground. Bleeding from one wing, Tang Lan rose unsteadily into the air and fought with an eagle that had dived down. Its sharp beak pierced his shoulder, and blood gushed out. He didn't even groan as he pressed down on the bleeding wound with one hand and transformed his other hand into gleaming claws that he used to stab the eagle in the eye.

Blood dripped onto the ground.

Humans had happiness and suffering different from other creatures, yet did he regret it?

Smiling, An Zhe took another step toward the Simpson cage. Tongues of flame licked his face, as hot as a scorching summer day.

The sounds of something thumping against glass came from the white building, but he didn't turn back to look.

Along with the Simpson cage, the sunset at the edge of the sky burned as well. The huge sun sank, and its magnificent red-gold light illuminated half the sky. The fighting at the research institute continued, with howling, explosions, blood, the sun's rays, and firelight mixing together.

Uncle Shu, who had once cooked potato soup for him, was picked up and hurled back down by a monster. His body hit the ground hard, and his gaze froze while blood flowed from the rims of his eyes.

On the blood-covered ground, death was everywhere.

In his eyes, everything slowed down. An Zhe took another step forward.

"Don't…" Uncle Shu rasped, and he let out a few heart-wrenching coughs. "Don't kill yourself…"

A creature's instinct was to live, and a species' instinct was to perpetuate itself.

Humankind had never gone gentle into that good night.

Facing the Simpson cage, An Zhe also felt the terror of impending death at last. He looked at Uncle Shu and softly asked him—though it seemed like he was asking himself, "But will you all still be able to keep living?"

Uncle Shu's consciousness was already fading. He slowly shook his head, then looked toward the distant horizon.

His gaze suddenly became fixed in place. After two seconds of silence, he suddenly broke out into a few wheezing laughs, and an excited expression showed on his face.

A low droning that was different from the monsters' howls came from the sky, and An Zhe suddenly looked up.

Above the resplendent golden horizon, a neatly arranged group of distant black shadows were coming smoothly toward the research institute, leaving behind long and feathery trails as they flew through the clouds.

"Air… airplanes," An Zhe heard Uncle Shu say.

He knew those were airplanes. Looking up at the familiar shapes, An Zhe suddenly felt a wholehearted joy.

They hadn't sent any distress signal to the Northern Base, but the Northern Base's fighter fleet had come to aid the research institute. In a conversation with Tang Lan not long ago, Pauli had urged them to disregard old grievances and go help the base when the research institute no longer existed. But now, it was the base who had disregarded old grievances and come to help the research institute.

Right at the time when everything was destined to end.

Pauli's words were correct. His species was both contemptible yet noble. You could make conjectures about humans' actions using the greatest

ill intent, or you could believe to the maximum extent in humans' kindness and leniency.

But the artificial magnetic pole had failed, so what would happen to the base?

What would happen to Lu Feng? Or did the base no longer exist? Where would he be? He knew that Lu Feng would give up everything for the base until the day the base no longer needed him.

A trickle of tears fell from An Zhe's eyes. In this vast Judgment Day, his love and hatred seemed all but worthless. Lu Feng had his own mission, and he himself had his own destiny.

He took another step.

“Boom.”

A micro nuclear bomb was released from the PL1109's bomb bay, and with a tremendous noise, it cut off the upward trajectory of the monsters below. The mountain peak—such a mountain peak was bound to become a target, but it was also bound to be easy to defend and difficult to attack.

"Open the cabin door," a cold and calm voice said.

"Prepare your hang gliders."

"There's a bit of an issue. Please wait a moment," the flight technician said.

The fighter plane was nosediving, and the cabin door creaked as it opened mechanically.

Lu Feng accepted the hang glider that a soldier handed over.

"You're going down?" Hubbard asked.

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

"When aiding the Underground City, it was for humankind's interests." Hubbard looked at him. "What about now? Will the Trial Court come to help the xenogenics?"

Lu Feng only watched as this mercenary team captain also accepted a hang glider and started adjusting it. He asked flatly, "And why are you

here?"

"I don't know." Hubbard murmured. "I just felt that I would regret it if I didn't come."

“Click.”

The cabin door sprang open.

"Good heavens." The flight technician backed up. "A fire? What is that?"

Fierce winds poured in from the outside, and Lu Feng looked down as he stood at the cabin exit.

Suddenly, he was stunned.

In front of the sea of flames, An Zhe lifted his head and looked at the visitors from the Northern Base.

At that moment, it seemed as if time had come to a standstill.

One looked at the other, and the other looked back.

An Zhe began to tremble violently as he directly met Lu Feng's eyes.

Their parting had been planned out long in advance, but their meeting was beyond all expectations.

But he hadn't expected to see Lu Feng here, and he knew that Lu Feng hadn't expected to see him here either.

The wind raised by the fighter plane clawed at the edges of his clothes. In a movement that seemed unconscious, he slowly reached out.

In that manner, those green eyes gazed at him. The Arbiter, whose mission was to exterminate xenogenics, had come to aid the Fusion Faction's base, and a monster was standing in the exact center of the humans' research institute.

The whole thing was absurd, but the glorious morning sunlight came pouring down, and they suddenly became brightly lit in each other's eyes.

Indeed, Lu Feng was this sort of person.

An Zhe's eyes curved as he smiled at Lu Feng. In his limited memory, he had never shown such an expression to Lu Feng before.

They were separated by such a long distance, but he saw those green eyes slowly become suffused with a smile as well—seemingly containing infinite tenderness.

A gunshot rang out as Hubbard fired at a monster in the air. The fighter planes dropped uranium shells in the vicinity of the research institute in a fierce bombardment, and the sounds of combat, explosions, and howling combined into a grand noise that merged with this symphony from the universe's depths.

But the monsters from the Abyss continually surged forth.

The sandstorms that followed the magnetic field's disappearance were almost here.

The last human territory was falling.

Humankind—was on the verge of extinction.

They locked eyes for a long time, seemingly erecting the deepest mutual hatred, yet also seemingly dispelling past grievances in an instant.

On this day, they would once again be together and once again, freely—

Freely—

An Zhe slowly closed his eyes and leaned forward.

Like a leaf fallen from its branch withering in late autumn.

In the raging blaze of the Simpson cage, at the moment when the morning sun was slowly rising and the setting sun of humankind was slowly sinking, his body turned into swirls of glittering dust that dispersed, fluttered in the air, and ended.

In the laboratory, on the screen that was covered with visual noise, those trembling and erratic dots suddenly gathered together and spun. The analysis program started up, and three seconds later, several slowly intertwining frequency curves appeared little by little on the screen.

As though it were destiny.

While looking at the parameters jumping on the screen, Pauli Jones switched the communication channel to the emergency channel connected

to the Northern Base and Underground City Base. Without knowing if they could hear him, he suppressed the tremor in his voice and spoke.

"This is the Highland Research Institute."

"Please adjust the emission frequencies of the artificial magnetic poles."

"Channel A1, 2, 5, 2.7."

"Channel A2, 9.13, 5, 3, 1."

"Channel D3, 4, 0, 7."

"Runge wave, level 6."

"Adams property, lattice 3."

"Configuration complete, please activate."

"Repeat."

"Channel A1, 2, 5, 2.7."

"Channel A2, 9.13, 5, 3, 1."

"Channel D3…"

Behind him, Rum finished adjusting those parameters with near-trembling fingers and pressed the round button in the middle.

The tops of the white towers at either of the Highland Research Institute shone with glaring light.

Imperceptible silent waves radiated outward like ripples from between the two white towers.

In the east and west, the humans' two magnetic poles emitted grand waves.

Like the first bell toll of the new year.

Everything fell silent.

48

“HE WAS JUST A... LITTLE MUSHROOM.”

"LU FENG!"

Hubbard shouted. He saw Lu Feng's fingers press down on the edge of the cabin door until they turned a bloodless white.

The slightly lowered eyelashes and blank expression seemed to strive to conceal their master's outburst, but the trembling fingers already revealed the entire truth.

Amidst the all-encompassing sea of flames, his voice was hoarse, yet still calm and forceful as he said, "Prepare to attack."

Unexpectedly, the attack was by no means difficult.

In that instant, the monsters' attacks seemed to have slowed greatly. It was as though they had stopped persistently and madly attacking people in search of something, and were just carrying out an ordinary hunt instead.

Amidst this ordinary hunt, some monsters turned around and went in the direction of the Abyss, while others continued attacking the research institute. Of the monsters that had already entered the research institute, more than half of them were killed by the Simpson cage. Then the Simpson cage ran out of power and gradually went out, but the research institute began its counterattack and effectively resisted the monsters' offensive.

As for the monsters in the periphery, they were solidly blocked off outside the line of defense by the PL1109's micro nuclear bombs and heavy weapons—this was the wilderness, so apart from the tiny courtyard on the

mountaintop, there was no need to hold back for fear of harming innocents. Just like the time when they flew above the vast flatlands of the Underground City Base, the fighter fleet was truly fulfilling its role here.

The monsters inside were gradually wiped out.

The heavy weapons had built up an insurmountable and smoky line of defense around the research institute. The monsters of the Abyss naturally had noteworthy intelligence. After doing a little thinking, the monsters in the back turned around, retreating in the face of unfavorable odds.

Their arrival was as abruptly tempestuous as a tsunami, and their departure was like the tide slowly receding. Atop this sorrowful mountain peak, two hours later, all was still.

Red, white, all sorts of liquids covered the open space in front of the research institute. At noon, when the sunlight was at its most glaring, the bloodstains glistened.

The PL1109 slowly landed. The human military officers paid Pauli Jones a visit at the white building.

Seemingly bearing no feelings of animosity resulting from the differences between humans and xenogenics, they eagerly asked what exactly had happened earlier. The Highland Research Institute likewise treated them as compatriots. After explaining the stable frequency, Pauli Jones, as the research institute's leader, thanked the Northern Base for its selfless aid.

"How is the base?" he finished by asking.

However, the response he got was silence.

In the suffocating silence, a voice suddenly came from the emergency communication channel.

"This is the Northern Base." Dr. Ji's voice was tremulous. "Hello. Requesting information on the situation."

"This is the Highland Research Institute. Hello," Pauli said.

"The Northern Base… The monsters are falling back." Amidst the crackle of static, Dr. Ji's voice was hoarse. "The people of the base have retreated to the Magnetic Field Center's core laboratory. The number of survivors… is 342, and 136 are seriously injured."

"Air strikes are ineffective, and thermonuclear weapons cannot be used. Requesting light weapons and troops." He gasped heavily for breath, as though he were suppressing something. "The monsters are no longer madly attacking humans, but they still have not given up on taking surviving humans as their prey. We… we are still desperately holding the core laboratory's line of defense…"

Pauli stared silently at the blank screen.

"Are you hurt?" he finally asked.

Amidst Dr. Ji's formulaic tone, his voice finally took on an additional tremor of emotion. "I'm hurt, Mr. Pauli. We've never met, but…"

He didn't finish his sentence. After a hurried gasp for breath, however, he changed the topic. "I have served the base for twenty years and pride myself on my outstanding intellect, but I have not helped the base achieve any breakthroughs whatsoever, Mr. Pauli."

"In the past, I've heard the people of the Northern Base say that you presided over the research and development of the genetic examination instrument. Now, they say that you've extracted a stable solution, which may be why the artificial magnetic pole still has yet to malfunction amidst today's storm of distortion."

"Thank… thank you," Dr. Ji said. "We will defend the magnetic pole until the final moment. But please also… prepare for the magnetic field to disappear… Please… please take care of yourselves."

What followed were only the sounds of disordered breathing.

Amidst the intermittent static, background noise, commands, gunshots, screams, and the sounds of goods being toppled and walls collapsing faintly came through.

It was silent within the Highland Research Institute.

At last, someone asked, "Then… will we still die?"

The PL1109 fleet had brought fire support, but it was limited after all. Supposing the Northern Base had already run out of strength to hold out and the magnetic field that enveloped the entire world still could not escape its destiny of vanishing, how many days would the Highland Research Institute be able to last? There had been endless sacrifices and a stable frequency, but there was still no hope for survival.

Humankind's aspirations were still the full moon in the water.

Nobody replied.

In the deathly silence, the atmosphere was a lump of congealed rotted flesh.

Someone laughed softly, and it was like a knife sliding across the frozen rotted flesh and opening up a mocking cut.

But amidst this deathly stillness, the hissing static suddenly paused, and another unfamiliar voice came through.

"Hello." The other party's pronunciation was choppy, so the syllables could only be distinguished with difficulty.

"My deepest apologies. Our instruments broke down, so we were unable to successfully send anything to the emergency communication channel until now. This is the Underground City Base's command center."

The air was stagnant.

"This is the Highland Research Institute," Pauli replied. "How is the status of the Underground City Base?"

"Everything is well at the Underground City Base," the other party said. "After the collective monster attack two months ago, the base closed its ground entrance and adopted a full blockade mode. Today, the flatland was surrounded by a large number of monsters, but due to our geographical advantages, it was not invaded."

Pauli was slightly moved.

But the other party continued, saying, "The Underground City Base is thankful to the Northern Base for its selfless aid two months ago. We are especially thankful to Colonel Lu Feng, who made the decision to render assistance."

"After learning about the situation in the north, the supplies, weapons, and ammunition that the Northern Base had provided to us were all loaded onto transport planes. The transport plane formation took off from the Underground City Base six hours ago, accompanied by a thousand lightly armed paratroopers, and is expected to arrive at the Northern Base in half an hour to render assistance."

He said, "Northern Base, please persevere for thirty minutes."

There was a noise that sounded like something sliding to the floor. Afterward, the doctor's voice came through, low but very resolute.

"It will be done."

Pauli Jones's voice came through the communication channel.

"The stable frequency has covered the entire world," he said. "Please do not worry about substances distorting."

"Roger." The Underground City Base's operator held back the excitement in his voice. "Although we do not know what you did—thank God, and thank you."

Information kept coming.

"The Northern Base is continuing to defend," a young voice said. It seemed as though someone else had taken Dr. Ji's communicator.

Then came information from the Underground City Base.

"The transport plane fleet has landed."

"To the Northern Base's survivors, please indicate your location."

"Commence the breakout."

In the end, they scooped out the full moon in the water.

The sun rose bit by bit. Amidst the howling cold wind, the winter sunlight was glaring and devoid of any warmth. On the test tube racks, glass sparkled. In the still atmosphere, there seemed to be the sound of one heartbeat after another.

Original residents, newcomers, xenogenics, military officers—they kept watch in front of the communication channel, waiting for information on the Underground City Base's assistance and the Northern Base's condition. Even the vine that had always been guarding the research institute extended a single tendril through the window.

They also occasionally whispered to each other.

"How many of ours have died?"

"Uncle Shu died. His body is downstairs."

"What about Tang Lan?"

"Haven't seen him."

The breakout and counterattack had begun. Nobody reported on the situation through the communication channel, so everyone held their breaths as they waited.

Amidst this silent tension, Pauli Jones got up from in front of the computer.

Because of his age or his emotions, his footsteps were somewhat faltering. With a creak, he pushed the door open, and what he looked at first was the extinguished Simpson Cage—blood and bodies were everywhere outside of it, but the interior of the Simpson cage was spotless. Then he turned his gaze forward.

Outside the laboratory door, the black figure who had been leaning against the wall slowly lifted his head as well.

Those eyes seemed utterly vacant, age-old layers of ice covering a green ocean.

They only needed to meet to know who the other was.

Pauli Jones's gray-blue eyes were filled with grief.

"Child," he said gently.

Lu Feng did not respond to him, but his gaze traveled downward to settle on the sheet of white paper that Pauli Jones was holding in his hand.

Pauli's fingers trembled as he held the paper out. On the paper were several hastily scribbled lines. An Zhe's writing could not be described as beautiful. All of his strokes were plain and simple, so clear as to be reminiscent of a lake in springtime.

"Pauli, thank you for looking after me. I am the Northern Base's inert sample. Perhaps my frequency will be of help to you, but if not, I'm sorry.

P.S. Please be sure to remember our agreement."

"Was he really that inert sample?" Pauli Jones asked.

"The sample was a part of him." Lu Feng took the snow-white slip of paper, and his voice was slightly hoarse as he said, "What was your agreement?"

"If there came a day when the Arbiter of the Northern Base arrives…" Pauli said, "I should say that An Zhe left of his own will."

The rims of Lu Feng's eyes reddened slightly.

From behind him came the sound of heavy footsteps, which belonged to a dark-skinned Indian man.

Holding An Zhe's backpack in his hands, Rum silently held it out to Lu Feng.

Inside it, a few objects had been neatly packed.

A copy of Base Monthly, a silver four-pointed star badge, and a black pistol.

Lu Feng gripped the edges of the backpack. He bowed his head and stared at the contents within, his expression difficult to make out.

"He was brought here from the Abyss by our people… He was a good child, and he led a good life here," Pauli murmured while looking at him. "I

know that the base could not accept him. Did you know this entire time he was here?"

Lu Feng's gaze finally shifted from the backpack to Pauli Jones.

"I didn't know," he said.

The expression on Pauli Jones's face trembled violently, and he closed his eyes in anguish.

"I am deeply sorry," he said.

Their unexpected reunion was their final parting. It turned out that this sort of icy torture existed as well.

The bitterly cold wind blew through the mountain peak.

After a long silence, Lu Feng asked, "Where is he?"

"The Simpson cage is a high-energy force field and collider. Any matter that enters it will be bombarded and disintegrated into tiny pieces by its high-energy particle flow," Pauli said hoarsely. "I believe you saw for yourself."

The backpack thudded to the ground, and the muzzle of the gun rested against Pauli's temple.

Lu Feng stared at Pauli with an icy expression in his eyes.

"Where is he?" He repeated the question, articulating one syllable at a time. All of his emotions exploded at that moment, and his icy eyes contained a faint madness. He was like a convict who, despite having already been sentenced to death, still wanted to repeatedly confirm his sentence.

A sorrowful smile appeared on Pauli's lips, and he looked up at the limitless distant sky with his loving gaze. He was fully aware that what this man before him needed was only a white lie, even though they both understood everything.

"His frequency has been sent out to the entire world. He will deliver everything from the distortion," Pauli Jones said. "He's right by your side. There's no place where he isn't present."

Lu Feng only looked at him in the same manner as before, and they remained in that stalemate until Lu Feng's fingers shakily loosened and the pistol clattered to the ground. With a "bang," it struck the corridor's iron railing and triggered a drawn-out metallic hum.

"My apologies," Lu Feng said hoarsely. "I…"

He closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and did not finish his sentence.

"There's no need to be like this." Pauli looked at him with a tender gaze. "You can shoot me or vent your feelings however you please, child."

"Thank you," Lu Feng said hoarsely. "If he is still around, I will."

That was the most calm yet despairing sentence Pauli Jones had ever heard.

In that manner, they stood side by side in the late-winter corridor, all the way until the blood-like setting sun dyed the mountains and the Abyss and until the communication channel's volume was turned up inside the laboratory. Amidst the static, there came excited shouts.

"They're falling back—they've fallen back!"

"The tide of beasts is dispersing."

"The breakthrough succeeded."

From the channel, the cheers of victory rang out. The fragmented scraps of celebration were mixed with bits of information, such as how the Underground City Base's paratrooper unit sacrificed more than six hundred people, how the Northern Base's actual number of survivors was a hundred or so, or how people were eagerly asking why the distortions were no longer occurring and what exactly had happened at the Highland Research Institute.

Grief and joy overlapped little by little, despair and hope existing together. Everything was fortunate, and everything had its price.

The sacrifice of countless people, the sacrifice of one person.

A trickle of tears flowed slowly from the corners of Pauli Jones's eyes.

Suddenly, a mass of white floated down from Lu Feng's shoulder, drifted on the wind to land on Pauli's clothes, and extended soft hyphae to touch him with.

"What is this?" Pauli asked as he held it.

"The inert sample," Lu Feng said. "The thing most important to him."

Pauli Jones naturally knew who Lu Feng was referring to. Between the two of them, there was only one "him."

He stared at the hyphae, then reached out to touch it, and the hyphae gently wrapped around his finger. Pauli asked softly, "Why did it approach me of its own accord?"

Lu Feng said, "I don't know."

"This is an asexual spore, a fungus's propagule." Pauli Jones had a slightly stunned look in his eyes. "He never told us what species he belonged to. So he was a—"

While looking at the spore, Lu Feng murmured, "He was a mushroom."

His voice was hoarse, but it seemed to contain endless compassion and tenderness. "He was just a… little mushroom."

49

“HE IS THE ONE WHO JUDGES ME.”

THREE YEARS HAD PASSED since the final battle.

That day, the East Pole and the West Pole had emitted the absolutely stable frequency. Since then, monsters no longer persisted in attacking the human bases, substances no longer polluted each other, and humans found constancy in the distortion. Later, that frequency was called the "bell toll."

And the Highland Research Institute and Mr. Pauli Jones, who had discovered the "bell toll," were forever recorded within the milestones of human history.

Highland Research Institute, white building.

Green vines climbed all over the windows and railings. The vine that had always been guarding the research institute died naturally a year ago, and its seeds that had scattered all over the soil of the research institute sprouted and grew this spring. The distant mountains were covered with a layer of snow-white mist, and within the mist was a wild profusion of flourishing greenery. Everything was normal and everything was calm, as though it were a day in the spring of 2020.

In the corridor outside the laboratory, there was a wheelchair.

Pauli Jones was sitting in it. A primeval wind traveled through the Abyss, climbed up to the mountaintop, and stirred his head of white hair.

At his side stood Lu Feng.

"In 2020, I was fifteen years old and majoring in physics at university." An elderly voice sounded. "Later, I often dreamed that I had returned to that year and was standing at the podium, in the advisor's office, or in the middle of the sports ground. I'd loudly tell them that the geomagnetic field was about to disappear and that we had to take precautions ahead of time."

He paused, a hint of a resigned smile appearing at the corners of his lips. "Sometimes they'd believe me and sometimes they wouldn't, but when I opened my eyes each morning, what I saw was still this awful world."

"Fortunately, although the world is still so awful, or even worse than before, at least there's no need to count down the days until extinction."

Pauli Jones lowered his head. In his hand was a copy of Base Alliance Daily with the date and time on the cover, April 2164.

One hundred thirty-four years after the calamity occurred, humankind seemed to have finally been integrated into this violent world.

Many people would mention the last war. The Northern Base had chosen to assist the Highland Research Institute, otherwise, the Highland Research Institute couldn't possibly have persevered until the moment the stable frequency was found. The Underground City Base had chosen to aid the East Pole, otherwise, the magnetic pole would have collapsed and fallen to the enemy, and there would have been no way to emit the frequency. The two decisions were both made on account of humankind's inner kindness, and they narrowly achieved victory.

And the ones who had assisted the Highland Research Institute only had one fighter fleet, while the ones who assisted the Northern Base had only a thousand paratroopers. Humankind's final struggle as it moved toward its own demise was not a magnificent war but a dull cry. Although humankind believed its existence, evolution, and demise to be of vital importance among the world's changes, they had proved their own weakness and insignificance again and again.

Indeed, the human race had actually met its demise.

After being infected by the "absolutely stable frequency," they had finally obtained a permanent and stable immunity. Sometimes, there was even a chance of them being able to obtain a monster's genes, obtaining those powerful physical features and shapes while still maintaining clear wills. This may have been the Fusion Faction's victory—although the theories and methods used were not the Fusion Faction's.

After the peaceful fusion with monster genes, humankind's own strength had been enhanced, and they no longer depended so much on the limited quantities of weapons and equipment. They began using the monsters' methods to fight monsters, using plain methods to attack and defend. Some humans chose to leave the bases, either returning to the ruined cities or forming small settlements in the wilderness.

All in all, the cities disintegrated.

Around the world, there remained fewer than five thousand survivors. They could no longer form grand social structures or armies—those kinds of things. Centered around the East Pole, West Pole, and Highland Research Institute, small settlements radiated outward in star-like shapes.

The monsters of the external world who needed food still eyed them greedily, but they no longer coveted human genes, or to put it another way, most of the monsters who survived up until now had already obtained human genes. Viewed from a different angle, under that all-encompassing frequency, both humans and monsters had achieved stability. It was an undeniable fact that humankind's intellectual superiority had come to an end long ago.

The bell tolled, allowing humankind to survive but proclaiming the end of the age of humans. It seemed as though they had started being an ordinary species, living arduously in this world.

"Some people say it's a fall, but I think it's an ascension." Pauli looked forward. "We are simply retreading the journey that humankind's ancestors once took with new accomplishments and knowledge."

On the open space in front of the white building, young scientists clad in white coats traveled back and forth between instruments.

Suddenly there was a jubilant commotion, and a young man in the middle raised aloft a beaker full of water. The situation was crystal clear: by sampling and reproducing the frequencies of substances, they successfully infected other substances with the frequency of distilled water, turning the pitch-black muddy water in the beaker into a cup of clear pure water.

Many things were being redefined, and a new theoretical framework was beginning to emerge. Whether it was correct or not was a mystery, but it was indeed slowly progressing.

"I still don't understand exactly what these frequencies are. Do they represent a substance's fundamental composition? Or are they just terms referring to a substance's properties?" Pauli Jones's voice had become hoarse due to his advanced age. "Obtaining the frequencies of specific substances and then being able to alter the real world is even more of an expectation-exceeding accomplishment."

"We are still insignificant, only obtaining a superficial projection of the real world via simple and crude methods, but even a mere projection is enough to temporarily shelter humankind itself."

Facing the boundless wilderness, he muttered to himself, "In a hundred years, a thousand years, will we know more?"

Lu Feng pushed his wheelchair over to the waterfall-like vines. On this spring day when everything was coming back to life, tiny white flowers grew thickly all over the oddly shaped vines. The flowers came in a variety of shapes and hues ranging from dark to light, but they all coexisted on a single vine.

"Am I being too optimistic?" Pauli smiled. "Even the question of whether humankind still exists in a hundred years is a difficult one to answer."

Survival was as precarious as before, and dark clouds were still circling. There was still no effective solution to the issues of fertility and reproduction.

The copy of Alliance Daily in Pauli Jones's hand, which had already started going fuzzy at the edges from frequent perusal, was stopped on the third page, where two things were reported.

The first report stated that a scientist who had happened to fuse with a bird had laid an egg while in bird form, but the chick that hatched suddenly changed into human form after it turned one year old. The second report stated that a fertile woman from the Underground City Base had declared that when her life came to an end, she would be willing to walk into the Simpson cage and donate her own frequency for research.

"My life is coming to an end," he said and closed the Daily.

"Some people have finally survived. Throughout all these years, I've constantly been asking myself if I had finished atoning for my sins," he said. "But I still cannot face everything I did back then. I can only wait for God to judge whether I was right or wrong after I die."

Lu Feng asked, "Was it for this reason that you left the base back then?"

"Yes. I was unable to face my own heart after all and unable to approve of the Trial Court's beliefs." He looked at Lu Feng. "I can't compare to you."

"I haven't done anything," Lu Feng said.

Pauli shook his head.

A mighty spring breeze blew over the mountain peak, and the delicate fragrance of the vine's flowers dissipated in the wind.

"You all have faced everything that I could not face back then, and you've persevered the longest." He lifted his head and held Lu Feng's hand. "Humankind's interests take precedence over all else. Thank you for allowing the base and artificial magnetic pole to persevere until the end. This is the ultimate reason for humankind's victory."

Lu Feng said, "Thank you."

"I heard that they've started compiling a 'Base Chronicles.' In a hundred years, how will people judge the Trial Court?" Pauli looked toward the pale eastern sky, where the daybreak was rising, and his gaze contained a distant tranquility. "Some will criticize it, while others will eulogize it. The only sure thing is that everyone will remember it."

He continued. "And even more will remember you, child."

Lu Feng's gaze lingered on a patch of snow-white velvety petals.

The sunlight turned it into translucent golden crystal.

"There's no need." His eyes closed slightly and his voice was flat, as though all of what Pauli Jones just said had nothing to do with him.

The sun's rays also illuminated the dark silver buttons and trimmings on his black uniform. His figure was straight-backed and his attire impeccable. His nigh-perfect facial features, uncommon eye color, and impassive expression left a haunting impression on all passersby. New vines wound around the corridor that was bathed in the morning light. He stood in a patch of surging spring scenery, yet he seemed completely out of place.

In the courtyard and the corridors, many people would surreptitiously turn and examine him. As the final generation of Arbiters, he carried on his shoulders too many unsettled grudges and puzzling enigmas. Opinions in the Northern Base varied. Some said that he was assassinated, and others said that he shot himself. Only the people of the research institute knew that the Arbiter was staying here forever—although nobody knew why.

"Look at me, child." Pauli murmured.

Lu Feng looked at him.

Although those gray-blue eyes had clouded over, they were still bright with excessively clear and penetrating wisdom, benevolence, and grief. It was like they could see through all of the world's facades.

"Sometimes I feel like you've been freed, and sometimes I feel like you haven't," Pauli said. "These past three years, everything has been making a

turn for the better. Are you still unable to face the past?"

"No."

The answer, however, was unexpected.

Lu Feng looked straight at him, his voice calm and devoid of any hesitation. "I have not sinned."

"There's not a single Arbiter who would say such a thing."

"Humankind's interests take precedence over all else." Lu Feng turned slightly. In the infinite morning light, he was a backlit silhouette. "My belief has never wavered."

"Yet you live in suffering."

"I used to suffer for the trials," Lu Feng said. "Now, losing him is my only suffering."

"I'd never met such a warm and quiet child before." Pauli closed his eyes, seemingly dwelling on the past. "He came from the unknown into the world, as though it were for the sake of experiencing suffering. But humanity's suffering would not harm any of his innate qualities. My days are numbered. I only wish to see him alive one more time."

In the long silence, they looked at the laboratory behind them.

In that place that was only a wall away, young assistants were busy recording data. They were even more busy than ever, as though today were some special day. Visible through the window was a transparent rectangular tank laid horizontally on the snow-white floor. It resembled a coffin of crystal. The coffin of crystal was filled with pale green nutrient solution—and within the nutrient solution, snow-white hyphae grew without restraint, intertwining with each other and forming a snow-white cocoon that was shaped vaguely like a human.

It had grown very swiftly from a spore the size of a jujube pit into a long and soft aggregate of hyphae. Just like that chick who had suddenly changed into a human infant, one day, it exhibited a human form.

On countless nights, Lu Feng had leaned down and looked at that familiar profile through layers of hyphae.

"Is that him?" he asked Pauli Jones.

"He was an asexually reproducing mushroom, with no distinction at all between his body and his spore. I can only tell you that there are no differences genetically and that the frequency has always been identical. In a biological sense, they are one and the same," Pauli murmured with a small smile. "In your ancient legends, there are stories of the phoenix being reborn amidst raging flames. In fact, with regard to those creatures with simple compositions, it is indeed so. Death means rebirth. They have many ways of continuing their lives, unlike mammals."

"… Will he remember?"

"I don't know." Pauli shook his head. "It'll depend on him. Is that a new individual or a continuation of his old life? I'm afraid that we will only know after he wakes up. This is also part of my current research; remember what I mentioned to you before? This may be a new and unique method of survival for organisms."

Lu Feng turned his gaze to the distant sky, his expression unswervingly cold and calm. "I hope he forgets everything."

"Why?"

"The human base and I have only brought him suffering," he said. "I hope he'll never experience these things."

Pauli shook his head. "And how do you know what this world was like for him?"

Lu Feng's words landed softly. "Therefore, I'll accept all outcomes."

Pauli said nothing. In the silence, the sounds of instruments beeping, laboratory staff shouting, and objects falling to the ground suddenly came from the laboratory. The sounds traveled over intermittently, allowing the people outside to know what was happening inside.

At the break of dawn, the morning light illuminated Pauli Jones's elderly body. As though the final worries on his mind had been resolved at last, he felt a sense of relief and turned his wheelchair toward the laboratory, his gaze even warmer than before.

But Lu Feng didn't turn around.

"He's woken up," Pauli Jones said. "Why won't you go see him?"

In the laboratory, there were some chaotic noises.

After a very long time, Lu Feng spoke.

"You once asked me how exactly I viewed him." His voice seemed to come from a faraway place. "I thought about it a lot."

There was another long silence. Golden sunlight flooded the chain of mountains in the east, and a red sun sprang up from the horizon.

In the wind, he closed his eyes. The sculptures of the ones waiting, the portraits of those who went on pilgrimages, every one of them resembled him. Every person had once shown this expression, on the night before judgment arrived.

He said calmly, "He is the one who judges me."

There came the sound of a door, and light footsteps stopped not far away.

On the mountain peak, within the morning sunlight, the mist, and the gentle breeze, a clear, soft voice spoke.

"Lu Feng?"

-END-

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE 1

“LET ME SEE YOU GIVE BIRTH TO ANOTHER ONE.”

AN ZHE SANK INTO A DREAM.

He had dreamed this kind of dream a very long time ago—on the day he left Lu Feng.

Sometimes, although it was clearly daytime and he was awake, he would suddenly sink into dreamland again. They were probably the hallucinations of a dying man, but he didn't mention them to Pauli. The inexplicable bloody coughs, high fevers, and various aches and pains had already consumed too much of Pauli's mental energy.

In the dream, his body was divided into two, much like the leech in the past. One half was at the Highland Research Institute, while the other half was at some unknown place, free from pain and free from the cumbersome human body.

In the dream, he had neither eyes nor ears, no nose or any human perceptivity. It was the same kind of feeling as when he was just born, buried in the rain-soaked soil—mushrooms had their own senses, which could not be described in human language.

He knew that he wasn't far from Lu Feng. This must have been a delusion caused by him leaving Lu Feng, but it did not hinder him from getting closer to Lu Feng in his dream.

This dream wasn't always happy, either. Sometimes, he was put into a sealed container, accompanied by an ice-cold liquid. At the very beginning,

it was Dr. Ji at his side, and then later it was always Pauli, along with… many others who came and went.

He had nothing to do. If Lu Feng was nearby, An Zhe would wrap around him, but if not, he would soak in the liquid, thinking back on his own life.

Those distant memories floated to the surface—in the soil, in the rainy season, in the winter, and in the base.

He would get a little closer to Lu Feng when he recalled certain things, and Lu Feng's fingers would touch his hyphae. It seemed as though he had managed to stay together peacefully with this man at last. He was on the edge of wakefulness the entire time, but he didn't wish to wake up. In the real world, he and Lu Feng could never be like this.

But after he thought back on his own memories for the hundredth time, there was no dream he could dream, so he chose to wake up.

He discovered that he was still alive.

When he thought back to that day now, he no longer remembered it. The fluctuation of emotions had made many other places go blank.

He only remembered that he was standing at the door and that Lu Feng had turned around amidst a patch of lush spring greenery—he locked eyes with him in that manner, not able and not daring to step forward. He had dreamed too many dreams, and he had tried scooping up the fragile full moon in the water too many times.

Until Lu Feng walked up to him.

When this man wasn't around, he had cried many times. Sometimes his heart would violently tremble when thinking of him, but now, when he truly met with Lu Feng, the corners of his lips curled up in spite of himself.

He reached out to touch Lu Feng's shape. He couldn't tell anymore if he had gotten thinner or if he had become haggard—it had been too long. He hadn't met with this man in far too long.

It wasn't until then that tears slid down from the corners of his eyes. He withdrew his hand and looked blankly at Lu Feng before being wrapped up in a frontal hug and having the tears wiped from his cheeks. He rested against Lu Feng's shoulder, voice hoarse as he softly called out his name.

"It's me." Lu Feng said.

The people in the laboratory had congratulated him. Unexpectedly, Pauli had brought a man back from the dead—he couldn't imagine the involved principles at all. The people in the laboratory told him lots of words like genes, frequencies, samples, and such. It was all incomprehensible to him, but human technology had always been very miraculous, so he simply accepted it.

Three years had already passed since he jumped into the Simpson cage.

The outside world had calmed as well.

The age of genetic disorder ended with the single toll of a bell. His frequency was transmitted all over the world, but whether it was for good or ill could not be determined, for all tangible things were infected by the frequency at that moment and stabilized. People were always people, and a monster was always that type of monster. Polymorphic mutations could occur, but the dominant consciousness was always that one that had been in control when the bell tolled.

As for why this was the case, Pauli's explanation was that after many experiments and comparisons, the frequency obtained by the Simpson cage approached a definition of matter itself.

For example, when facing an apple and an orange, humans knew that this was an apple and that was an orange, but the apple itself did not know it was an apple, and the orange itself did not know that it was an orange either —they themselves would never know. Only humans knew.

Just like how cicadas did not know of spring or autumn, humankind's field of biology was only a flawed superficial analysis of the surface. They also had no way of knowing what constituted themselves or what defined

them as humans—it was a framework that four-dimensional creatures could not understand.

However, by means of the Simpson cage's analysis of elementary particles, they briefly glimpsed a negligible reflection of the truth and glimpsed traces of the true meanings, then grasped some noteworthy frequencies. In this symphony of the universe, humankind was the musical note that was most easily destabilized by other creatures, whereas he, a mushroom that somehow had its own consciousness, was the stable frequency that could contain everything. When this stability was bestowed upon the entire world, a brief peace arrived.

"This is chance," Pauli said. "Chance is destiny, and living is fortuitous."

When An Zhe heard that, he had just been fed a piece of peeled apple by Lu Feng.

With only a single bite, the freshly picked apple gushed with juice that was sweet and slightly tart. He forgot what he was about to say, and Lu Feng fed him another piece.

"Then what about oranges?" he asked. "What do oranges taste like?"

Lu Feng had said, *Wait until autumn*.

Pauli invited them out along with their apples and future oranges.

On the way back to his room, An Zhe ate half of an apple and left the other half for Lu Feng. He had intended to cut it into pieces for the Colonel, but Lu Feng did not let him touch the knife.

On this matter, An Zhe did not argue with the Colonel. If the other party were not Lu Feng, he actually would not really have wanted to cut the apple. He was drowsy, for it was time for an afternoon nap.

But he could not sleep. As he held a tablet, he scrolled downward. Stored within it were the documents he had scraped together from various places over the ten days since he woke up. The electronic version of Alliance Daily, the research records copied from Dr. Ji's computer, the

laboratory manuals copied from Pauli's computer, along with many other similar things.

Lu Feng sat down at his side, and he swiftly turned, not allowing the man to see. Lu Feng let out a soft chuckle, then cut up the remaining half of the apple and fed it to An Zhe.

Although the apple was very tasty and the Colonel very good-looking, An Zhe did not want Lu Feng to be next to him while he was reading the documents. He was always paranoid, thinking that Lu Feng was looking at his screen.

But the hateful thing was, when he woke up, he discovered that Lu Feng had taken over the room he used to have at the research institute. Everything in the room was identical to the way it was before he died, but its owner had changed.

He tried to have Lu Feng move into the room next door, but Lu Feng expressionlessly told him, *If you don't want to share a room with me, you can continue sleeping in the tank of nutrient solution.*

Leaving An Zhe at a loss for words.

It had been three years. The past three years had not softened this man's character at all, not even the slightest bit.

As a result, he could only share a room, a desk, and a bed with the Colonel.

In the end, he got paranoid to the point where he could no longer continue reading the documents and so drowsy that he had to sleep.

"Boring." On the bed, with Lu Feng holding him from behind, he dazedly stared at the white walls.

The Colonel's voice was like snowpack just beginning to thaw. "Where do you wish to go?"

"I wish…" An Zhe looked at the wall, slight confusion in his gaze.

He had somewhere he wished to go.

And it was a place that, apart from himself, only Lu Feng knew about. He hadn't mentioned it even to Pauli.

"I wish to go find An Ze," he murmured.

In the cave where everything began, An Ze's bones were still waiting for him. He had many things he wished to say to An Ze. He remembered every word that An Ze had said to him. An Ze had said that he was someone whose life had no meaning. He wished to recount the Northern Base's dramatic changes to An Ze, and he wished to tell him of the source of that last bell toll.

If he hadn't met Lu Feng or An Ze, none of that would have happened. Just like that, destiny tossed and turned within countless coincidences.

But the Abyss was so big, he couldn't find him, and nobody was willing to accompany him in his search, so it would forever be an unattainable wish.

"But I can't find him," he mumbled. "I can't do anything, and I don't remember where I left him."

"I can," Lu Feng said into his ear. "Let's go find him."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

Everything was like a dream. The next day, after they bid farewell to Pauli, their armored vehicle was airdropped by a transport plane into the exact middle of the Abyss. The crew commander was the PL1109's pilot. Before bidding farewell, he had insisted that they remember to search for traces of Hubbard and Tang Lan as well. Ever since the war in which monsters laid siege to the research institute, they both had been confirmed missing. Now, the only thing they were certain of was that although Tang Lan had suffered heavy wounds, he was still alive—their bodies were nowhere to be found for miles around.

"I strongly suspect that they went off to recuperate, then got lost, and then laid eggs." After putting the facts together and making one last deduction, the crew commander flew the transport plane away.

Lu Feng opened the armored vehicle's door and helped An Zhe down. The ground was covered with velvet-like grass that rose past their ankles. An Zhe looked into the distance. In the late spring, lush greenery stretched through the Abyss as far as the eye could see. Primeval winds shook the branches and leaves, and the sounds of birds flapping their wings traveled from afar. He had come to this place again.

He looked at Lu Feng. Lu Feng had come here with him, which surprised him even more.

He asked, "Why have we come here?"

Lu Feng lifted his eyebrows slightly. "Didn't you want to come?"

"For a very long time," An Zhe said. "Don't you only do things for the sake of humankind?"

"The Trial Court has been dissolved." Lu Feng looked at him. "If there are more wars, or when they need me, I'll return to the base then."

Those cold green eyes contained neither suffering nor resentment, or anything else. It was like he had lost something, yet also as if he had been relieved of a heavy burden.

An Zhe reached out and plucked a soft fallen leaf from Lu Feng's shoulder, then found himself effortlessly wrapped in Lu Feng's embrace.

"Now I wish to be with you," he heard the Colonel say in the silence.

"… Why?" he asked in a small voice as he hugged Lu Feng and rested his chin on Lu Feng's shoulder.

He didn't say plainly what he was asking, but he knew that Lu Feng would know. It seemed that the two of them had never needed to say much but still understood each other.

He knew that he liked Lu Feng, but he didn't know why Lu Feng would like him.

Lu Feng took one step forward, and An Zhe ended up with his back pressed to the car. He looked up at Lu Feng.

Those eyes were still as quiet and clear as when they first met at the base's gates.

Lu Feng looked at him for a long time.

Throughout those three years, he often dreamed of that day.

Back then, Lu Feng's soul was deeply trapped in a thorny mire, at the edge of losing control and unable to do anything about it.

And in that state, he met An Zhe.

An Zhe was a person, a xenogenic, and a monster. Lu Feng should have killed him, yet he also should not have. He was everything that could not be defined, the wildest possibility, and was like all the people in those pools of blood that had come before him.

"Why did you walk into the Simpson cage?" he suddenly asked.

An Zhe slowly searched his thoughts, then shook his head.

"I don't know," he said.

Then An Zhe asked in a small voice, "So you don't know either?"

"I do know," Lu Feng murmured, putting his forehead to An Zhe's. "Because you're a little mushroom."

This perfunctory reply made An Zhe lift his gaze in discontentment, but after seeing everything surging in those cold green eyes, his gaze softened in spite of himself.

In the Abyss, all things grew.

In fact, he remembered every word Pauli had said.

The entire universe was a place of constant disturbance, and the consciousness of humans were ephemeral lights and fragmentary shadows produced within a brief period of stability. A story was taking place in a book, but the book was currently being burned to ashes. The frequency of the magnetic field was like cold air, resisting the scorching heat. His frequency turned its pages into asbestos, allowing it to keep intact within the blaze.

But the flames still burned. They were unknown waves, unpredictable disturbances. They would still continue to come, either hotter or change into a completely unfamiliar form entirely.

Perhaps it would be the very next second, perhaps it would be ten thousand years from now.

But—

It did not matter.

They had all already received an outcome beyond their wildest hopes.

Leaning against the car, he smiled at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng leaned down and kissed him on the corner of one eye, then turned to one side and began calibrating the compass and navigator.

While he was fiddling with the compass and navigator, An Zhe continued flipping through his own documents. He had already gone through nearly all of it earlier, so before five minutes had passed, he completely finished reading everything that was left. With a click, he pressed the lock screen button.

At that point, Lu Feng had also finished what he was doing.

They started from the south. In front were lakes, to the east were jungles, and to the west were bogs.

"Where to?" Lu Feng asked.

"I don't know." An Zhe's attitude was somewhat negative.

"Let's go east," Lu Feng said.

"Why?"

"I don't know where your cave is," Lu Feng said, putting aside the navigator. "But I do know where I met you for the first time."

It was better when he hadn't said that. Once he did, An Zhe's mood completely soured.

He looked up at Lu Feng, his eyebrows slightly furrowed and the rims of his eyes red, about to start crying.

Showing a rare baffled expression, Lu Feng cupped An Zhe's face. "What is it?"

"You don't like me at all," An Zhe said, frowning.

Lu Feng said, "I do like you."

An Zhe raised his voice. "Then what about my spore?"

Lu Feng didn't mention the matter of the spore to him at all. An Zhe was so fierce in the past, he didn't dare to ask of his own accord. He could only search everywhere for news, wishing to know where that inert sample had gone.

But it wasn't anywhere. It wasn't until he searched to the very end that he saw something about "inert extract" from scraps of the news along with a photo showing a snow-white spore the size of only a jujube pit inside a glass bottle.

Now, Lu Feng didn't mention it, and traces of the spore were even scarcer.

There was only one possibility, which was that it had been killed.

Upon hearing those words, a hint of a smile appeared in Lu Feng's eyes instead.

An Zhe was so angered that he could not speak coherently.

"It got smaller and smaller in your care." His vision misted over, and he was on the verge of crying. "You killed it."

Lu Feng said, "I didn't."

"You did!" An Zhe grabbed his arm, a lump in his throat. "You weren't good to it at all… Give it back to me."

"It still exists. Don't cry," Lu Feng said. "What is the spore to you?"

"It's…" An Zhe strove to describe it in human language, but he couldn't. He could only say, "It's just my spore."

"Is it very important?"

"Yes, it is." An Zhe was almost shaking with anger. "I can die, but I must plant my spore. I only gave it to you because I thought you would

raise it properly."

"Is it even more important than your own life?"

"… Mm-hm."

"To any creature, its own life is the most important."

"The spore is the most important," An Zhe unrelentingly argued. "It's not like you're a mushroom. You wouldn't understand."

"Okay." Lu Feng's voice still contained a very gentle smile. "So it's your child?"

An Zhe bit his lip. A mushroom's world had no parents or children, no kinsfolk, not even friends. Every single type of mushroom in the Abyss was different from the other mushrooms. He had no way of using human relationships to describe the relationship between himself and his spore. Unable to say that it was his child, he could only say, "I gave birth to it."

"I raised it."

"You didn't raise it properly at all."

"Hm?" Lu Feng said. "Then why is it that at the Lighthouse, even though it saw you too, it only floated to my side of its own accord?"

An Zhe had just been brooding over Lu Feng killing the spore, but now that the past was brought up again, he instantly recalled how the spore acted so traitorous.

Both of them were no good.

Unsure of what to say, he could only reply, "But I gave birth to it."

Lu Feng smiled again.

The world spun.

An Zhe was pressed firmly against the car.

Lu Feng's fingers skated over his abdomen, and in that weakest and softest place, the cool fingertips sparked a shudder.

An Zhe softly gasped for breath.

Lu Feng lowered his head and gently spoke into his ear.

"Let me see you give birth to another one."

EPILOGUE 2

"ONE DAY."

AN ZHE LOOKED up at Lu Feng with a frown. He was unhappy, the rims of his eyes reddened, and he did not speak to Lu Feng. Grabbing Lu Feng's wrist, he forcefully tried to move it aside.

But the man was far stronger than him, so An Zhe couldn't pull it away at all. After trying a few times, he simply turned his fingers into hyphae and wrapped them around Lu Feng's wrist, pulling it outward. But the strength of his soft hyphae was even less than that of his human form, breaking with even a bit of force.

"Don't pull," Lu Feng said into his ear, his voice low.

An Zhe ignored him.

Lu Feng laughed softly, then parted the snow-white layers of hyphae with a feather-light touch and once again laid his fingers on the skin of An Zhe's abdomen.

"Do you have any more?" he asked.

"I don't." An Zhe's tone was hostile.

He already had his spore dug out once by this man, so how could there possibly be a second time? Furthermore, he truly did not have any new spores now.

The strange thing was, although the original spore had clearly been lost and there was no new spore in his body, that feeling of something being missing had also left him. The hole in his body that could never be filled

was gone, and his mind was no longer constantly preoccupied with the missing spore—just like a long time ago, when he had just been born. When he woke up, he could not have been any more whole.

An Zhe looked down at his hyphae, his snow-white, soft, dexterous, and well-defined hyphae. Slightly stunned, he put his other hand to his abdomen and touched them. Then Lu Feng held that hand as well. He could not help but think of his time at the research institute. He would shut himself up in a deserted room and carefully change part of his limbs back to hyphae, and what would be revealed after the human skin and bones disappeared was a tangled dark gray mass. The original hyphae had shriveled and liquefied. Before long, his entire body would turn into a puddle of black liquid and dry up on the floor or in a corner; this was how a mushroom died. Every time he got to that point, he would turn them back into human form as though he had received an electric shock, then look out the window at the endless night sky and at the deep nighttime of his own life. The tremendous fear that every creature felt when directly facing death shrouded him as well. He would feel the bone-deep chill of it, tremble, close his eyes, and wait for everything to slowly dissipate before walking back out to live with the people of the research institute like a normal human.

Of these things, Lu Feng knew nothing.

For some reason, this knowledge made the rims of his eyes sting. Recalling the fear and despair from that time, he once again looked up at Lu Feng, his heart suffused with a feeling of hurt even stronger than before.

Lu Feng clearly understood his expression.

"You're crying for real?" The hand that the Colonel had held his shoulder with moved up, touching the corner of his eye. "What's the matter?"

An Zhe shook his head. "In any case, I'm not giving it to you."

With that, he struggled to escape Lu Feng's grip, but he was restrained in another way, and the two of them toppled over onto the grass! He found

himself pinned down beneath Lu Feng.

The thin, soft mid-February grass rose past him. Springtime came to the Abyss extraordinarily early this year. An Zhe turned his head and looked to the side. A plump, pure white mushroom had just unfurled its cap. Its gills were not yet fully open, but presumably it would not be long before thousands of spores would fall from the cap and diffuse outward like fog.

Other mushrooms had many spores, but he only had one, and it was gone to boot. He bit his lip.

He heard Lu Feng say, "Don't be afraid."

He said nothing, and Lu Feng continued. "I don't want the spore."

"Then what about my spore?" An Zhe asked.

"You wish to know?"

"I do."

Lu Feng scooped up a few strands of hyphae.

"Other mushrooms all have many spores," he said. "Why did you only have one?"

"I don't know," An Zhe said.

"When did you know that you were a mushroom?" Lu Feng asked.

An Zhe thought hard, then said, "Since a long time ago."

"Was there a catalyst?"

"It was raining."

"What else?"

"I snapped in half, but I didn't want to die yet."

"Did it hurt?"

An Zhe shook his head.

Lu Feng asked, "Is there anything else?"

An Zhe could only think of one thing. "It was raining," he repeated.

Lu Feng seemed to think for a while. Then he asked, "You can fuse with many creatures. Are you able to distinguish exactly how many you've fused with? No matter if it was active or passive?"

An Zhe shook his head. He had indeed come into contact with many creatures either actively or passively, but he did not know if he had obtained their genes. The sole time was when he completely absorbed all of the blood and tissues from An Ze's body, unconsciously obtaining the ability to turn into a human.

He heard Lu Feng ask, "Have you seen snakes before?"

An Zhe nodded, for he had certainly seen snakes before.

"Snakes shed their skin. The original skin is discarded, and it crawls out from there," Lu Feng said. "Many creatures can do the same."

For a while, An Zhe did not know what Lu Feng wished to express, so he merely listened.

"But Mr. Pauli said that this is still very different from your form of life. Some single-celled eukaryotes have an additional trait," Lu Feng said. "When the environment is hostile, it will stop growing, and the main parts of its body will form a sporocyst and fall into a deep sleep, only to come back to life in a suitable environment."

An Zhe frowned. He seemed to understand what Lu Feng was saying, yet he also seemed to still be unable to accurately express it.

"Furthermore, you are a fungus. Although you aren't the same species as them, you're all living things with simple compositions."

Feeling that what Lu Feng was saying was not flattering, An Zhe pushed the man away.

Lu Feng did not move. He only looked at An Zhe, a hint of a smile in his eyes. "It still hasn't occurred to you?"

An Zhe looked at his hyphae as he asked in a small voice, "Are you saying that my… my spore grew into me?"

Strangely, after saying it, he did not feel surprised at all. Perhaps he simply said something ordinary.

He became lost in thought as he contemplated the whole thing.

"Pauli said that when you cast off your fundamental form as a mushroom, you also obtained new properties. Perhaps you fused with the properties of other simple creatures, obtaining a new form of life. As an existence similar to sporocysts, the spore became a spare life to be used after your body decayed. Therefore, you viewed it as more important than your own life because it truly was your life. Through this method, you may have achieved immortality," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

"Also," Lu Feng said, "the first time I met Pauli, he was suffering greatly. At that time, the spore landed on Pauli of its own accord. I figured that only you would know him."

An Zhe nodded, for he did indeed have a vague recollection of approaching the grieving Pauli. Similarly, he also had many memories of approaching Lu Feng.

It was simply that he was not aware of what he was doing at the time.

He perceived his intact body.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled to Lu Feng.

If this were indeed the case, then he truly was wrong about Lu Feng—he had assumed the worst of this man. Lu Feng truly had not gone against the wish he left behind and raised the spore to adulthood.

"It's okay." Lu Feng leaned closer to him. Within those perpetually indifferent cold green eyes, indescribable waves seemed to surge. He lowered his voice, saying, "… You're alive."

Indeed, he was alive.

He was still alive.

Golden sunlight shone down on the verdant grass, and sparkling dust gently floated on the breeze. It was like a dream.

An Zhe lightly grabbed the edge of Lu Feng's sleeve.

Then he thought of something else—the thing he had held a grudge over for a long time already. On that long-ago day, he had opened the laboratory

door and seen the spore. He had assumed the spore belonged to him and would float in his direction, but it had floated to where Lu Feng was.

He said it.

Lu Feng murmured, "It was you wishing to be at my side."

An Zhe slowly lowered his gaze.

"I didn't know," he said. "At that time…"

At that time, he and Lu Feng did not exactly have a good relationship.

At that thought, he then wondered if the relationship between himself and Lu Feng could now be considered good.

He gradually tightened his grip on Lu Feng's sleeve, but these unformed and chaotic thoughts vanished like mist the moment he looked up and met Lu Feng's eyes.

Today was February 14th. On this day four years ago, he and Lu Feng met in the wilderness of the Abyss.

Later, they spent a brief amount of time together. Then he slept for three years, and Lu Feng raised the spore for three years.

They might not have known each other for too long, nor did they have much experience interacting with each other, so compared to the relationships between other people, theirs really did not count for much.

However, for the two of them, for a xenogenic and an Arbiter, there was nobody else who could be like the other party.

In the wind, he and Lu Feng silently locked eyes.

After a long time, he heard Lu Feng murmur, "Thank you."

He asked, "For what?"

"A lot of things." Lu Feng's tone of voice was neutral, but his eyes never left An Zhe. He reached up and gently rested his hand on the side of An Zhe's face, his voice slightly raspy as he said, "Mostly for waiting for me all night on Judgment Day."

An Zhe smiled, clearly very happy, but then he felt a little bitter. With his voice also slightly raspy, he said, "Then I also thank you for always

sparing me."

The Colonel's pale, thin lips curled up, and then he lowered his head to kiss the corners of An Zhe's eyes, every touch fleeting. In his cold green eyes was An Zhe's reflection. An Zhe suddenly felt that this color was very gentle.

Lu Feng looked at him in that manner, and An Zhe was pressed into the grass. He initially felt that this man's gaze was very gentle, but then a feeling of danger slowly arose, as though he were being watched from the jungle by some man-eating beast that was ready to pounce.

When Lu Feng leaned down, dropping all his weight on An Zhe, and buried his head in An Zhe's neck, the feeling reached its peak.

They were so close that there wasn't the slightest gap, pressed directly against each other. Lu Feng's breathing and heartbeat were right in his ear and on his body.

An Zhe hesitantly put his arms around Lu Feng's shoulders and used his limited knowledge to analyze the current situation.

Then he asked in a small voice, "Do you wish to bed me?"

He heard Lu Feng let out a soft laugh, the sound slightly hoarse and breathy.

Then Lu Feng asked, "Who taught you that?"

"Mr. Shaw said it once," An Zhe replied.

"Shaw Scott." Lu Feng accurately pronounced Mr. Shaw's name. "What else did he say?"

An Zhe said, "It was all more or less the same."

In short, Mr. Shaw's language always revolved around these words.

Lu Feng asked, "If I did, what would you think?"

An Zhe thought hard.

"That…" he said, "that Mr. Shaw truly was very incredible."

He used to think that Mr. Shaw's words were completely unfounded, but now it appeared that they were correct about even the Arbiter himself.

He truthfully shared his thoughts with Lu Feng.

Buried in his neck, Lu Feng began to laugh. It unexpectedly sounded like he was quite happy.

After he finished laughing, he rolled over and lay side by side with An Zhe on the grass. An Zhe turned to look at him and saw that this man was indeed relaxed. He had never even dared to dream that this Arbiter who lived in constant night would wear such an expression.

Lu Feng asked, "Who else wished to bed you?"

"Hosen, I suppose, when I came to the base in their vehicle." An Zhe thought back as he spoke. "I think there was Josh as well, and on the third floor, there were some mercenaries."

"What about you?"

"I didn't like them much." An Zhe thought about their gazes.

He saw that Lu Feng was looking at him as well, the cold arches of his eyebrows relaxing. It was a clear expression, similar to the mountain breeze currently blowing through the wilderness.

An Zhe became a bit lost in thought. If time repeated itself, if Lu Feng were not the Arbiter, if he were an invincible, ambitious, and powerful young military officer, perhaps his expression would often have been like this.

"Then," Lu Feng said, "I'm different from them."

An Zhe questioned him with a puzzled gaze.

The Colonel only smiled. It was very good-looking, like the season's snowpack in the initial stages of thaw.

"Let's go." He got up from the grass. Facing the morning sunlight, he held out a hand to An Zhe. "I'll take you to search for An Ze."

An Zhe also held out his hand, got pulled upright, and then followed.

"What's different?" he asked.

"Everything's different."

An Zhe looked at him with suspicion.

"Really?" he asked.

This time, the Colonel did not reply.

EPILOGUE – ROSES

FIRST ROSE - YEAR 2103

"WE HAVE NO OTHER ALTERNATIVES."

"Everything in the world is devouring humankind, and our numbers are decreasing day after day."

"Child." Madam Lu removed the golden rose badge from her chest, placing it in the palm of her hand, then slowly curled her fingers around it so that she could feel the soft raised lines of the petals, as if she were touching a real rose.

"Everyone must take up the weapons that they can so they may confront this age. Everyone." Her voice was gentle like a ripple of water.

"But you won't receive anything, Mom."

"No single individual besides me will benefit, either. It is the entirety of humankind that will benefit. It is only when the entirety of humankind gradually escapes this awful plight that we as individuals will see improvement, although it may be hundreds of years into the future. But the truth is, it is only when you've saved everyone that you yourself will be saved."

"But we cannot rule out the possibility that our salvation will come far later than everyone else's," she continued. "That is when we take up weapons to protect ourselves."

"Will that day come, Mom?"

"It will." Her voice was startlingly resolute. "Unless—unless we have all perished before we could be saved. But remember, child. No matter what, humans love each other."

"Child, do you love them?"

"I do."

She handed over the badge to her young daughter.

SECOND ROSE - YEAR 2105

There was a loud thump.

Something heavy landed on the ground, and the world spun. Her mother had used that object to hit her on the back of the neck, and she fell to the floor.

Then came the sound of the bedroom door slamming shut.

With a click, the door was locked.

She should have fallen unconscious, but at the last second, a glimmering golden object fell from her coat pocket, and its color called back the remaining scrap of her consciousness. With a ringing in her ears that was like the roar of airplanes, amidst a terrible pain that seemed to split her head open and a numbness that felt like she had lost all her limbs, she reached out, gripped the golden rose badge, and hurriedly panted for breath.

She would not allow herself to fall unconscious. Her temperament was mild, but her will was strong, far exceeding that of ordinary people, which was also something her mother acknowledged.

And her mother was a distinguished and outstanding woman. Auntie Lin Shan had said, *Your mother had shown an extraordinary gift for leadership since she was a young girl and was even the initiator of the Rose*

Manifesto and one of the drafters of the birth law, which saved humankind from disaster. Until now, when the oppression that women were suffering became heavier and heavier, exceeding the agreed-upon upper limit, she and her compatriots took up weapons and defended the freedom and dignity, just as they were supposed to.

It seemed as though a long time passed. Half an hour, one hour, or perhaps two hours. Through the bedroom door, she heard rough knocks come from the nearby entryway. Then came the rhythmic tapping of high heels. That was her mother, Madam Lu. There was not a single person who did not know that Madam Lu had been self-possessed and elegant all her life. When she was not with child, she always wore a long crimson dress girdled at the waist with modest black high heels, and she carried herself with a grace that did not change with the passage of time.

The door opened, and the visitors entered. Their footsteps were very heavy, as those were the sounds of military boots striking the floor. She felt a sense of danger, but of late, these sorts of things happened often.

Then came the sound of endless chatter, which seemed to have been deliberately lowered, and she vaguely heard a few words like "modify," "cease," and "centralize." Her mother had often conversed with some people over the last three months, and although she avoided her daughter, the keywords she had unintentionally heard were the same.

She knew more or less what had happened. For the past half a year, the anti-oppression "Roses" posters could be seen everywhere, and the base had attempted to reach a compromise with them.

"I do not agree," her mother said in a raised voice.

"I'm afraid you need to come with us."

"We have already come with you many times."

"It's different this time, Madam."

"Are there others?"

"Only you, Madam. The Marshal wishes to personally negotiate with you. You may also choose to bring others."

"I demand that Lieutenant General Lin Shan and her armed escort come along."

"Of course, Madam," the officer said after a short silence.

It seemed as though the officer dialed a number, while her mother walked over to the filing cabinet near the bedroom door.

The officer hung up.

A long while later, Madam Lu said, "I'll prepare the materials. When Lieutenant General Lin Shan arrives, I will go."

Then came the sounds of the file cabinet opening. Everyone in the living room was very quiet.

A long time passed, so long that she nearly lost consciousness.

But she was still thinking, why would her own mother knock her out?

Why?

Why?

Because…

Because—

She continued thinking such thoughts until she was right on the cusp of losing consciousness.

Until a gunshot rang out.

She trembled all over. Her hands dripped with cold sweat, and the golden badge slipped from her hand. In the very next moment, it was going to hit the floor and make a clear sound.

And her unsteady beliefs would be just like this badge.

In this difficult-to-measure span of time, she strenuously gathered her fingers together, securely clenching the badge in her palm once more, and put her fist to her chest.

After a long while, blood slowly trickled through the gap beneath the door like an octopus's tentacle.

She turned her gaze away from it and quietly looked at the comfortable room. Whether her gaze contained sorrow, hatred, pity, or perhaps nothing at all was a mystery.

In the following moment, she completely lost consciousness.

THIRD ROSE - YEAR 2105

She was brought to a place where she stayed in a few small rooms along with some other girls of a similar age. Every day, people would deliver food and water to them. She knew that many things happened outside, lasting for at least three months, because her new lifestyle lasted for three months.

She kept thinking, if her mother had not known that danger was coming, why did she knock her out that far in advance? If she had known that danger was coming, why had she not taken precautions before it was too late?

If shooting Madam Lu could have solved the problem, why did the chaos last for three months? If it was predicted that it would lead to three months of chaos, why did they choose to kill her?

Sometimes, she suspected that her mother had intentionally allowed herself to be killed. And knocking out her daughter was to allow her to live.

Her mother had even said that apart from the women closely connected to the Manifesto, the other members of the base were indifferent to the opposition activities. Of course there existed a way to make them care, which was to make them see how massive the thing oppressing the women was, and there would eventually come a day when it crushed everyone.

Or perhaps she would never know the truth of that time.

No matter what had happened, her mother, Madam Lu, and Madam Lu's companions had been defeated.

Because she and her companions had been brought to the entrance of a massive, silvery-white hexagonal building. This building, which she could see every day as soon as she pulled open the curtains, was called the Garden of Eden.

In the main hall was an older woman she did not know, pulling her along by the hand.

"Child," the Madam asked, "do you love humankind?"

"No matter what," the girl said softly, looking into her eyes. "Humans love each other."

She walked in.

And she knew that, many years later, she would be called Madam Lu as well.

As if her mother still lived.

FOURTH ROSE - PRESENT

It was a deep green monster.

An Zhe crouched down and examined it.

It was nearly dead. In its abdomen were three bloody holes, each the size of a bowl's rim, from which thick black liquid was flowing. Its skin, which consisted of fine scales along with protruding spines and lumps, feebly rose and fell. Four of its five eyes were compound eyes, and they were shrouded over with an ominous layer of white. The fifth eye was tightly shut, and the dozen-or-so fist-sized compound eyes on the backside were dimmed.

In the Abyss, it was rare to see mortally wounded monsters like this one. This meant that it had just eked out victory in a struggle and that the aroma of its blood had not yet been noticed by other hunters.

It was not large, about the length of a newborn human baby. Of course, that did not mean it had always been that length, because the polymorphic-class monsters of the Abyss could freely change between many forms and sizes. Pauli had said that this would be inconceivable under the previous theoretical framework because some substances would vanish into thin air and other substances would appear out of thin air, but if it was explained using waves and frequencies, the changing of forms was merely an alteration in frequency, which was easy to achieve and understand.

Now, the reason why it looked like this on its deathbed may have been because it wished to die in this form. Perhaps it was its original form, or perhaps it was its favorite form.

An Zhe gently touched its head with his hyphae, but there was no reaction whatsoever.

"It's almost dead." He frowned slightly as he looked at the monster.

Next to him, Lu Feng only said, "It's raining."

An Zhe tilted his head back and saw that dark clouds had gathered overhead. With a "plop," a raindrop fell between the layered branches and leaves of the trees and vines and splattered on the ground. In the following second, yet another drop landed on the monster's wound. It spasmed, seemingly feeling pain from it.

The summer rain came so swiftly that in just a few seconds, white raindrops came pelting down thick and fast, sounding like drumbeats as they struck the leaves. Lu Feng covered An Zhe's shoulders and head with his uniform coat. An Zhe said, "When we came, there seemed to be a cave nearby."

He grabbed Lu Feng's hand and stood up, then hesitated for a few seconds. In the end, though, he picked up the small and trembling monster, and the two of them walked toward the nearby mountains.

"The shape isn't quite right," Lu Feng said.

But An Zhe did not feel anything in particular, for the Abyss had never been short of strangely shaped landforms.

The cave mouth was right there, a quiet opening between tangled vines.

The monster in An Zhe's arms was still trembling. Many years ago, he had dragged the severely-wounded An Ze back to his cave in a similar manner. Although he knew in his heart that the cave before him now was definitely not the cave from back then, he had the strange feeling that time and destiny were overlapping and that he was traveling the path from back then once more.

However, when he stood at the so-called cave mouth, he finally believed Lu Feng's assessment.

The cave mouth was not the commonly seen irregular opening, but an approximation of an arch. It was an abandoned building, squeezed by the raised ground into its current appearance. Within the Abyss, there really were some of humankind's ruined cities scattered around, and the sites had various buildings with different functions. In the span of a hundred years, the creatures of the Abyss grew upon and infested them.

Once inside, the surroundings were pitch-black with the occasional fluorescent glow from plants. An Zhe put the monster down, then placed the flashlight in an appropriate spot. The flashlight lit up a limited area. This place was a spacious hall, its furnishings long since decayed. It seemed to be a church. The walls were mottled with signs that monsters lived within, but they seemed to be from a very long time ago.

There was a sound of carapace scraping against stone as the dying monster moved five centimeters toward them. An Zhe reached out and touched the fluff on its limbs, and the monster's head turned. Unlike mammals, insects' eyes lacked pupils, so it was difficult to make out what their vision was focusing on, but An Zhe knew that it was looking at him.

Why was it looking at him? What was it thinking? What kind of feelings would a five-eyed monster have when it was on its deathbed? An

Zhe did not know. Strands of white hyphae climbed up the monster's body and gently covered its deepest wound.

Its limbs twitched, as though the monster wanted to come to An Zhe, but in the following moment, all movement ceased.

It was about to die.

An Zhe looked at it without retracting his hyphae. It felt like there were eyes on him, and when he turned, he discovered that Lu Feng was leaning against one of the church's crumbling pillars with arms crossed and gaze cast in his direction, as though he were observing An Zhe's every movement.

"Did you do this often?" Lu Feng asked.

"Sometimes," An Zhe replied.

He knew what Lu Feng was asking. If he encountered a wounded creature in the Abyss, he would drag it back. Occasionally, a seriously wounded creature would live due to recovering in the safe cave, but the vast majority of the time, it would die.

It had been the same with An Ze.

Lu Feng was still looking at him.

"At that time, did you already have a human's consciousness?"

An Zhe thought back for a moment, then shook his head. He was just a mushroom at that time, and furthermore, he did not know how to describe a mushroom's living state in human language.

He pursed his lips, then continued. "If my hyphae broke, I would feel pain, and I was afraid of dying. So when I saw them about to die, I would think of ways to help."

After a long time, he saw Lu Feng smile. "That is something you would do."

The coat had gotten wet from the rain, and this place was particularly dark and damp. Fortunately, the backpack they always carried around

contained a few blocks of charcoal. They set up a stand, made a fire, and turned the flashlight off.

"Are you cold?" Lu Feng asked An Zhe.

An Zhe shook his head, but he still moved closer to Lu Feng, and Lu Feng draped an arm around his shoulder.

Neither of them spoke. An Zhe leaned against Lu Feng's shoulder and watched the dancing flames.

"Will I be able to find An Ze?" he asked after a long while.

He and Lu Feng had agreed to stay in the Abyss for one month and at the base for one month.

Lu Feng did not dislike the Abyss. An Zhe even felt that the Colonel preferred the Abyss to the base. The Colonel knew many aspects of the Abyss like the back of his own hand. In this month, he could also collect many samples for the research institute. But no matter how skillful Lu Feng was or how much the scope was narrowed, the Abyss was still very big.

"So long as that cave still exists, yes." Lu Feng said.

An Zhe thought back on everything about the Abyss. "The cave entrance may have been covered up by mushrooms, flooded with water, or collapsed by large monsters fighting… And sometimes the caves themselves are alive. They'll wake up and then leave."

He continued, "But I still want to search."

"This is something I promised to An Ze."

"Although he didn't know."

"Then let it be a promise I made to myself."

He spoke to himself, while Lu Feng just repeatedly stroked his hair. In the end, he said to An Zhe, "He won't be angry because you were late in finding him."

An Zhe nodded. An Ze was a very good person.

He cut off his fanciful thoughts, and while continuing to watch the flames, he slowly spoke of the Abyss. Lu Feng simply listened.

At some point, it suddenly occurred to An Zhe that he had already recounted the entirety of his life as a mushroom to Lu Feng. Lu Feng knew of the rainy season and the grass, as well as An Ze and Josh. He knew of all the people he knew, and he knew of all the things he encountered.

On the other hand, he knew nothing about Lu Feng's past.

"Have… have you ever made a promise to someone that you couldn't keep?" he asked.

An Zhe already thought of his answer. He imagined that a person like Lu Feng would not lightly make promises or have unrealistic fantasies.

But contrary to his expectations, after a brief silence, Lu Feng said, "I have."

The crackling of the firewood gradually softened, and the hot flames turned into a red glow on the pitch-black charcoal. The surroundings dimmed, and the aroma of dust wafted over.

The stairwell on the twenty-second floor of the Garden of Eden had also been a dark and dusty place.

"When the day comes," a gentle female voice suddenly spoke into Lu Feng's ear, "when the day that we are all freed comes, I will no longer need to meet my children in secret like this."

Jibran was not Madam Lu's child, but he often came to the twenty-second floor as well. As he sat on the railing of the emergency stairs, his little legs swinging, he said, "Madam, you'll definitely be able to see that day."

The Madam patted his head. "Our great scientist is here."

Jibran tilted his head back and whistled. "Lu Feng and I will see that day too."

The Madam's gaze moved away from Jibran and settled on Lu Feng. "Do you also want to go to the Lighthouse?"

Lu Feng shook his head.

"Then you're just like your father." The Madam kissed his forehead. "When you grow up, you must protect the base."

Then the Madam took one of his hands and one of Jibran's hands, put them together, and placed her own hand on top.

"We will all see that day, and when that day comes—" Upon her young face was a gentle joy. "When that day comes, we'll be together, along with your father. Promise me, you two."

"Promise me, you two."

"I promise, Madam."

"I promise, too."

Lu Feng's story was very short, but while An Zhe was watching him, his attention wandered.

This time, it was Lu Feng who watched the dying fire.

An Zhe reached out.

He straightened up and attempted to hold Lu Feng in the same way that Lu Feng had held him earlier. The Colonel, seeming to understand, adjusted his angle and moved closer to An Zhe. An Zhe put an arm around his shoulder, and although he was a bit unaccustomed to it, it wasn't bad.

"You once told me that she turned into a bee because of a rose from many years ago," Lu Feng said. "I've been constantly thinking about who it was that gave it to her."

An Zhe was taken aback.

On a day when the ultrasonic disperser had not yet been invented or when it had briefly stopped working, a bee that had mistakenly entered the city was enticed by the flower and stung Madam Lu on her finger.

The bee's weak frequency concealed itself in her body, to be awakened one day in the future by the vast and unknown wave from the universe.

Within this base, only Madam Lu had roses because she loved such things and other people loved her. Lu Feng's father and later Lu Feng

himself would give her seeds that the Lighthouse collected and confirmed to be safe—only those two people.

An Zhe gently held Lu Feng's hand.

The pile of firewood burned out, and the dim red was receding as well. The wind echoed inside the church. It seemed to be another windy night.

"I hope you can go to the United Front Center," Madam Lu had said.

That was the last time Lu Feng spoke with her before he officially joined the military. Back then, he was at a small field site on one side of the base, a distance that the base's civilian communications could barely get through to.

"That place suits you the best. They also go into the wilderness the least often, so it's also the safest," she had said. "In all my years serving the base, this is the only time I've been selfish. I want you to live. I hope that all my children can live, but I only know you."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"If it's someplace else, I won't stop you either, but don't go to the Trial Court. I'm afraid of that place," she murmured. "Last year, there was even a shooting incident at the Trial Court. Many of the base's drastic changes began from bloodshed, and the Trial Court sheds blood like water every day. There is too much suffering there."

"Were you listening?" she asked after a stretch of silence.

"I was," he replied.

She smiled. "Then promise me."

"You must promise—"

The rustle of static suddenly started up.

"Bzz—"

It was immediately followed by soothing music, a relaxing frequency, and a gentle female voice. "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the base's signal has been interrupted. This is normal. Please refrain from panicking and carry out all activities as usual. The

communication signal will recover at some point. At that time, the public broadcasts will be sent to you, so please stay tuned."

"… Please stay tuned."

When all the wood burned into loose pale debris that would fall apart with just a touch, the church fell into darkness and lonely quietude.

Right at that moment, however, countless faint green lights lit up, for the insect monster they picked up had died.

An Zhe looked over. Its body gradually fell apart and dissipated into a scattering of tiny green lights, resembling a cloud of glowing green smoke or a swarm of fireflies.

The lights first enveloped them, dream-like, then rose and illuminated the entire derelict church along with the mottled painting of the Virgin Mary on the left wall and the massive painting of the crucifixion of Jesus in front. Withered vines hung on the Virgin Mary's shoulders and her cheeks were scored by animal claws, while Jesus's body was covered with mold. Only their eyes were clear. From behind the vines, mold, and dust, they silently observed the mortal world.

The stream of lights dissipated.

Destiny dispersed in the mortal world.

EPILOGUE – SUMMER

SUMMER HAD COME to the Abyss.

Below the Highland Research Institute, a deep green that covered everything rose and fell, like a mighty ocean connected to the pale blue sky. In the distant mountains, a flock of black winged monsters circled, letting out long warbling cries.

Their cries and the wind were delivered together to the mountain peak. Above the corridor, the foliage and clustered flowers of the vines swayed, and snow-white petals drifted down to land on An Zhe. He raised a hand to catch one, holding it in his left hand, and fiddled with the tip of a vine with his other hand.

Lu Feng reached out to remove the petals on his shirt collar and hair. Feeling the man's movements, An Zhe turned back and pulled the vine over to Lu Feng. "Look."

He had just discovered a new snow-white bud on this vine.

Of course, whether there were new buds on this vine or whether the buds were big or small or black or white would not pique Colonel Lu's interest. The Colonel expressionlessly leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

"Tsk." Across from them, Dr. Ji let out a sound akin to admiration. He leaned against the windowsill, left hand shaking a reagent bottle and right hand hanging at his side.

In the last battle to defend the Northern Base, Dr. Ji had lost his entire right arm and the lower part of his right leg. He had carried out the conversation with the Highland Research Institute in the midst of such terrible agony. As for why he survived instead of dying from excessive blood loss, it could only be attributed to the mercy of God.

He later applied to transfer to the Highland Research Institute. His brain had been unaffected, but in this age without artificial limbs, a right arm and half a leg were more than sufficient to put an end to the scientist's life. He had not come to continue his own research, but rather because of his admiration for Pauli Jones and his willingness to contribute his own body for new research. With the help of dozens of experimental volunteers who were similar to him, the research institute determined six safe frequencies that could be propagated, among which was a creature that had the ability to regenerate limbs.

In short, Dr. Ji was now like any other regular person, although he was still not yet accustomed to his new limbs.

An Zhe turned to look at Dr. Ji, wishing to see what he was clicking his tongue about this time.

Dr. Ji was looking at Lu Feng. At the same time, he lifted his hands and sharply clapped twice.

"You've been seen by me, Colonel Lu," he said. "If I hadn't seen it, I would've truly thought that you were planning to forever be an honorable gentleman, a qualified father. Oh, you seem to be too young, so you can be a competent older brother instead."

Lu Feng plucked the last petal from An Zhe's neck, then gave a flat look at Dr. Ji.

"Jibran," he said, his tone of voice straightforward, "I've overestimated your personality."

"Okay, okay okay okay." Dr. Ji raised both hands in surrender. "I was wrong, I've underestimated the mighty Arbiter's moral standards."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"It was my mistake, I admit it. It's not that your personality is too respectable, it's that my moral standards are indeed rather low." Dr. Ji continued begging for mercy. As soon as he shifted his gaze, he saw An Zhe, who was looking at him while holding on to Lu Feng's wrist.

"Supposing I was given such a little darling"—he grinned, held out a hand, and made a gesture—"I'd tie him to the bed, and then…"

Lu Feng shot him a cold look.

"… and then dissect him." Dr. Ji shut up after he finished his sentence.

"There's something wrong with Dr. Ji's brain," Lu Feng said to An Zhe, his head lowered. "You can consider using your hyphae to treat him."

"There's absolutely no need!" Nearby, Dr. Ji went pale with fright. "I'll just leave."

This suggestion of Lu Feng's to plot Dr. Ji's murder also failed to pique An Zhe's interest. An Zhe stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on the side of Lu Feng's face.

Once again, Dr. Ji said, "Tsk."

Lu Feng said, "You can go now."

"Is this how you're going to treat your best friend, Colonel Lu?" Dr. Ji asked.

"Yes."

"What, I don't even have the qualification to watch you two play house?" Within Dr. Ji's voice was a trace of heartbreak.

"No."

The phrase "play house" piqued An Zhe's interest, so he once again lifted his head to look at Dr. Ji.

"So cute." Dr. Ji looked at him as well, an odd light flashing in his eyes. "He'd cry for a long time after being dissected, wouldn't he?"

An Zhe always had the feeling that Dr. Ji had been possessed by something. Perhaps he had fused with Mr. Shaw.

Dr. Ji crossed his arms and let out a sigh before shifting his attention back to his light blue reagent bottle.

"Colonel Lu, you really won't try it?" he asked. "Extract No. 1014 doesn't have any side effects. In combination with a minor frequency adjustment of the magnetic poles, after three subjects were injected, one of them had perfect night vision. This is something that you yourself brought back from the Abyss a month ago."

Sunlight shone in from the gaps between the vine leaves and onto the slender glass tube, the reagent sparkling within.

Lu Feng merely glanced at it.

Beneath the doctor's expectant gaze, An Zhe answered in Lu Feng's stead. "He doesn't want it."

"Tch." Dr. Ji turned and left with his reagent, fiddling with his communicator. "Pauli is calling me. Goodbye."

An Zhe said, "Goodbye, Doctor."

Lu Feng truly did not want it, An Zhe knew.

Moreover, Colonel Lu did not need to obtain those strange enhancements or abilities at all, for he already came and went freely from the Abyss.

While An Zhe was lost in fanciful thoughts, he latched onto the nearby lush vine with his hyphae. He had been eyeing it for a long time.

"Don't eat things willy-nilly." Lu Feng spotted his movements.

"This can be digested," An Zhe argued.

He extended a strand of hyphae to show Lu Feng. The hypha climbed up to the cuff of the Colonel's black uniform sleeve and formed on the silver sleeve buttons a verdant new leaf that gently trembled in the wind.

This was An Zhe's recent amusement. Ever since he discovered he could safely fuse with all living and non-living things, he tried many of them—apart from the ugly ones.

On one relatively successful occasion, he turned himself into a room full of drifting willow catkins and nearly choked the Colonel.

But fusion was not always safe either. Just as Lu Feng said a long time ago, polymorphic-class monsters would sometimes make mistakes when changing form. Not long ago when he was drinking potato soup, out of his love for this plant, he went to the laboratory and fused with a small piece of potato, then unexpectedly fell unconscious and woke up only after three hours had gone by. Pauli had said, *This is because your frequency as a mushroom and the potato's frequency are too different, so rejection occurred*. It was the same when fusing with other things. Although the results were always positive, the process was full of uncertainty, just like how a piece of sodium would dissolve in water but the process would produce an explosion.

From then on, Lu Feng prohibited him from eating things willy-nilly.

But An Zhe wished to eat this small piece of vine. This action would not cause any harm to the vine's life, and furthermore, the vine had no abnormalities. It was just a quiet and beautiful blooming vine.

An Zhe gently scraped a small opening in its skin, and juice seeped out.

It was very… quiet. As the pale green juice saturated the hyphae, a wind from the Abyss blew through the cold sky, stirring this vine that was attached to the research institute. The sun, moon, stars, everything in the sky shone upon it. An Zhe closed his eyes. It seemed like his body was likewise relaxing, and Lu Feng was right at his side, so he did not need to worry about anything. Allowing Lu Feng to half-hold him, he sat down on the bench in the dark green corridor.

Perhaps his condition was normal and the vine was also normal. Lu Feng had not allowed him to eat this vine, but he did not stop him either.

That was an implied acceptance.

He lay in Lu Feng's arms, grabbing his hand, his thoughts very disorganized. It was like he was soaking in warm water.

"It's been growing here for many years, and it was originally a vine that wouldn't flower," he said. "Later, some winged animals brought pollen over, so then it had white flowers. It thinks they're very pretty, and it's very happy."

As he softly rambled about the feelings he experienced from the vine and its memories, he reached up to hold Lu Feng by the shoulder and burrowed deeper into his embrace. He rubbed his head against Lu Feng's neck, then pressed his cheek against the slightly cool silver tassels on the other man's chest, feeling very comfortable.

Lu Feng hummed to indicate that he was listening.

A vine's feelings and memories were very simple things, but there were also some things that couldn't be described in human language. An Zhe scraped together a few words. "It also wishes to have blue flowers. Then… it also hopes that birds or butterflies and bees will come again and pollinate its flowers. After pollination, it can bear fruit."

Then there was nothing else to talk about.

Lu Feng ruffled An Zhe's hair.

Just then, Lu Feng's communicator lit up, and he picked it up. An Zhe also looked at the communicator screen, which showed a message from the already departed doctor. "You really won't consider Extract No. 1014? Your friend truly needs you very much. He needs a test subject."

The doctor still hadn't given up on peddling his extract.

With a smile, An Zhe watched Lu Feng push a button and reply with one word. "No."

The doctor replied, "Why is your attitude so cold? Isn't night vision good? You don't need it? Don't you want it? Every time you go to the Abyss, I worry for your safety. It's only after you inject Extract No. 1014 that I can rest easy."

He spoke as if it were actually true.

Lu Feng replied, "Aren't infrared glasses easy to use?"

"Then you can consider Extract No. 1015, pure black membrane wings with an average wingspan of four point three meters. You'll be able to fly, and it looks great. I sincerely hope you can experience the feeling of gliding through the air. Won't you consider it?"

"Don't need it," Lu Feng said.

The speed at which the doctor replied was swift. Even through the screen, his resentment as he quickly typed could be felt.

"Times have changed, Mr. Arbiter."

"You must forget the doctrine of human lineage, lay down the prejudices in your heart, and embrace foreign genes."

Lu Feng's reply was as simple and cold as before. "Thank you."

"It's not right of you to be like this. Do you need psychological counseling?"

"No."

"You're beyond saving!" The doctor went so far as to send an exclamatory voice recording.

It was followed by a text message. "Just when will you be able to cure your obsession with clean bloodlines and morals? You once exiled yourself. Have you still not come back yet? I wish to splash you with extract."

It was clear that the doctor was already irate.

He was always like this after failing to peddle his extracts.

With an expression that was as calm as always, Lu Feng replied, "I'm very normal."

"Choose between 1014 and 1015, and I'll believe you."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"See, you're beyond saving," the doctor said.

Lu Feng frowned slightly. After a long time, he tapped out a single word on the communication interface and sent it.

"Ugly."

A brief silence.

"You really are something," the doctor said.

Lu Feng loosened his grip, and An Zhe held the communicator, smiling as he read.

He thought, the doctor unexpectedly just learned it, whereas he had guessed it long ago.

After the "bell toll," many people voluntarily took in some frequencies that were certified to be safe. Some people grew wings, while others obtained the ability to photosynthesize. Of course, some people experienced harmless rejections, and there were even a rare few who obtained nothing despite fusing.

But Lu Feng refused such things.

Of course, the reason was not at all like what the doctor said, with Lu Feng having an obsession with bloodlines and not allowing the makeup of his own species to be contaminated by other monsters.

The true reason was very simple.

Lu Feng felt that those monsters, or xenogenics, were all very ugly.

Having him peacefully coexist with the humans at the research institute who had fused with other creatures' genes? Fine. Having him also try to grow some other things? Not a chance.

He hated it.

An Zhe put the communicator aside and looked up at Lu Feng's face. His point of view was just right for seeing all the details.

Lu Feng had an unforgettable face, but few would dare to look directly at him, and even fewer would carefully examine his features.

An Zhe felt that his eyes were the most good-looking point about him, as distinctive as the crisp, biting wind at the top of the mountains in the Abyss. He reached up to touch the Colonel's thin eyebrows. When he was making the mannequin, there was a time when Mr. Shaw had repeatedly

admired the blank mannequin head that only had eyebrows and hair, clicking his tongue in admiration. *Well done.*

Further down were long and narrow deep green eyes half-covered by eyelashes, their appearance cold and lonely. Within those eyes, it was possible to dimly see one's own reflection.

An Zhe thought that if a human looked like this, they indeed had the qualification to disdain other things for being ugly.

He looked at the communicator again, and there was another message from the doctor.

"So what you mean is that I'm not good-looking either?"

The Colonel did not reply.

He turned back again to look at Lu Feng and burrowed even deeper into his arms. For some reason, he just wanted to do so right now, and he strangely felt a little lethargic.

Lu Feng pulled him closer and asked, "What is it?"

An Zhe shook his head, having suddenly thought of a problem.

He looked at Lu Feng but said nothing.

An Zhe was a mushroom who often slept early and woke up early, with eyes that were usually clear and bright, but now it was like they were fogged over with a layer of wetness.

Lu Feng lowered his head, getting a little closer.

An Zhe said in a small voice, "I'm also a xenogenic."

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said. "Little xenogenic."

An Zhe asked, "Do you think mushrooms are also ugly?"

"Not you. You're fine," Lu Feng said. "The color white is pretty."

"Then what if I were a gray mushroom?"

"It'd be all right."

"What about a black mushroom?"

"That's fine too."

"What about a rainbow mushroom?"

"Hmm." Lu Feng looked at him expressionlessly. His voice was flat as he said, "I'd give you a white mushroom to eat."

This man had a trait where his expression would look more serious the more he teased others.

So An Zhe also expressionlessly said, "I'll eat you."

With a soft laugh, Lu Feng scooped him up and changed their positions so that they went from a horizontal hold to facing each other.

An Zhe flopped forward as though he were boneless and just happened to bump his forehead against Lu Feng's. It was unusual, for he normally did have bones. But right now he was feeling lazy down to the marrow of every single bone, so he did not draw back. The rubbing from Lu Feng's high nose bridge was a little ticklish, so he rubbed back, then buried his head in the hollow of Lu Feng's shoulder.

Lu Feng encircled him, and he unconsciously continued rubbing against Lu Feng.

Seeming to smile, Lu Feng held him a little tighter.

The communicator lit up and went out, then lit up again as Dr. Ji continued tirelessly sending slanderous messages. Lu Feng glanced at the doctor's irate words, thought of the conversation from earlier, and turned to An Zhe.

He asked, "Are my moral standards very high?"

"Huh?" For a while, An Zhe did not understand what he meant. After some thinking, he said, "You're a good person."

"Oh."

Feeling that perhaps his answer was somewhat perfunctory, An Zhe added, "You're very good to us."

Lu Feng asked, "What about to you?"

"To me…" An Zhe pondered it. "Sometimes you aren't very good."

"You can give your answer one more time," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe stubbornly said nothing, which made Lu Feng laugh again. When he laughed, his chest vibrated a little, and they were so close that An Zhe could feel it.

Lu Feng said nothing else.

So An Zhe began to think.

Of course, Lu Feng was good to him. Getting wounded while in the Abyss was inevitable. Sometimes only a trickle of blood would ooze from his arm, but the way Lu Feng treated his wounds would make him feel like his arm had been broken with the amount of care he took to do so. If An Zhe wished to do something, he would not stop him. If An Zhe did not wish or agree to do something, he would not demand it of him either, although such a thing seldom happened.

However, this man often bullied him over some small matters. Starting from the chaotic prison disaster, when they had just gotten to know each other, this man had revealed his true nature.

Lu Feng was quite good to Dr. Ji as well, although it appeared that the two of them were exchanging cutting remarks every day.

Then others—

Of course, there was nothing to nitpick in the way Lu Feng treated them.

Supposing the research institute encountered a calamity, no matter who shared a room with Lu Feng, Lu Feng would inevitably make that person leave first while he himself faced the danger alone. If someone asked for help, Lu Feng would definitely not refuse them either.

But that was all. If not for essential and work-related interactions, he would not communicate more than necessary with anyone other than Pauli.

In fact, the people of the research institute had very amicable relationships. Mutual banter and quarrels were both very common occurrences, and there were many peaceful conversations and

collaborations as well, but it was obvious that the mighty Arbiter would not join in.

An Zhe thought that the Colonel had been protecting people from afar for too long, to the point where he had forgotten how to mingle with them, or perhaps he had never learned how to at all.

He said, "You can also lower the expectations you have for yourself a little."

"How?"

An Zhe had no clue how he was supposed to do that, so he replied, "Think for yourself."

Lu Feng said, "Okay."

The timbre of his voice was also very chilly, seeming to contain a smile; it was a very youthful sound.

An Zhe thought that he was a mushroom that had joined human society to a certain extent. In this place, he still had much to learn. But the same was true of Lu Feng. In that way, they were exactly the same.

So he said, "For example, if you wish to be friends with the people of the research institute, you can eat with everyone and bring them fruit when you come back from the outside."

These sorts of methods may not be applicable to Lu Feng. He was only giving examples, and of course Lu Feng would understand.

"I don't really wish to," Lu Feng said. "I have you to eat with and bring back fruit for."

"That's different."

"Hm?" Lu Feng's voice took on the slight nasal sound it often had when he was teasing An Zhe. "What's different?"

An Zhe did not really wish to talk to this man, so he bit Lu Feng's neck. It seemed to hurt, so he kissed the same spot to make up for it.

Lu Feng's voice contained a smile. "You're right."

An Zhe felt that he and the Colonel had been talking past each other from the beginning. He wished to sit up and knead Lu Feng's face.

So he put his hands on Lu Feng's shoulders and moved back a little.

Right at that moment, his body suddenly went limp for no reason, and he nearly failed to stabilize himself as he fell forward.

… Right onto Lu Feng.

Lu Feng supported him. "What is it?"

An Zhe shook his head, for he was unable to describe how he was feeling.

Lu Feng touched his forehead, but he discovered nothing. An Zhe rested against his shoulder and took a hurried breath, unable to muster up any strength as he said, "I don't feel well…"

"Where are you not feeling well?"

An Zhe just dazedly wrapped himself around Lu Feng. It was difficult for him to describe how he was currently feeling in human language. It was like… like receiving the season's call, waiting for something to happen. The last time he had this sort of premonition, it was the day his spore left him. But this time was different.

Was he going to produce a new spore and begin another round of withering and rebirth? No, that wasn't right either. Right now, he only wished to be a little closer to Lu Feng. Lu Feng held his hand. The Colonel's hand was very cold, but then An Zhe realized that Lu Feng's temperature was normal and that it was himself who was very warm.

He rubbed against the hollow of Lu Feng's shoulder, shook his head, and closed his eyes, and some blurry images appeared before him.

Wind. The summer wind blew from someplace south of the Abyss. The jungle was a deep green sea, heaving and churning in the wind, and the vine's new leaves gently swayed as well. Summer was its flowering period. In the spaces between the leaves and branches, snow-white flowers grew

like mushrooms popping up from the soil after the rain, and petals filled the sky.

Then came waiting.

Waiting for what?

Waiting for birds, waiting for butterflies.

What would the birds and butterflies do?

He whimpered in discomfort.

It was that vine's problem. He had just disregarded Lu Feng's warning and eaten the sap from one of this year's new vines before these strange symptoms presented themselves. It was like that time when he ate a piece of potato and passed out for three hours.

Lu Feng tilted An Zhe's head up and gently patted his cheek. "An Zhe?"

An Zhe was clearheaded, but he had lost control of his body. To clearly see his condition, Lu Feng lifted him up a little, which made him very uncomfortable. As An Zhe kept trying to lean against Lu Feng, he mumbled, "The vine…"

"What? Pain?"

An Zhe hauled over one of the soft vines dangling from the corridor at random. "The vine."

Holding him, Lu Feng breathed a faint sigh of relief. Indeed, An Zhe did not look like he was in pain right now.

He patted An Zhe's back, and An Zhe whimpered as he tried to burrow into Lu Feng's arms.

Lu Feng glanced at the nearby cascade of flowering green vines.

Behind the vines was the white building of the research institute. Fortunately, this place was not far from their living quarters.

There was a faint aroma of flowers on the wind, something that had always been there. Now there was an additional cool fragrance that was faint to the point of being nearly imperceptible, like the scent of grass and small white flowers after the rain.

It was what mushrooms liked as they grew. After a few rainy seasons, it would become the scent of the mushrooms themselves.

The mighty Arbiter let out a rare soft sigh.

He held An Zhe by the shoulders, making him meet his eyes.

An Zhe tightened his grip on the fabric of his sleeve and looked up at him, fine droplets clinging to his wet eyelashes.

"You are a mushroom," Lu Feng said. "You can't eat things willy-nilly. ”

An Zhe looked at the vine. There were no vines in the world more normal than this one, but he was still very uncomfortable. Only by being close to Lu Feng could he find relief, like how the vine's white flowers insisted on waiting for butterflies.

With a frown, he returned Lu Feng's gaze.

Lu Feng looked down at him as well.

Then he was picked up.

"Will you keep that in mind now?"

EPILOGUE – HEROES

"REMEMBER WELL: bravery, steadfastness, and self-sacrifice are the heroism in this age we are in, the heroism of humankind as a whole."

In the Garden of Eden, Tang Lan was reciting a lesson.

"What collective and individual heroism have in common are—"

Hubbard covered his face with an illustrated firearms manual. "You still aren't done reciting?"

"Just about." Tang Lan shut his book and looked up at the ceiling. "Hubbard."

"What is it?"

"Do you wish to be a hero?"

Hubbard pulled the manual down a little, revealing chestnut-colored eyes. He looked at the ceiling as well, and after three seconds, he said, "It doesn't matter to me."

After three more seconds, he asked, "What about you?"

Tang Lan said, "I don't know."

Their dormitory teacher at the Garden of Eden was a short-haired woman.

“Every boy wishes to be a hero." She put away their books, then added, “Girls, too."

Hubbard looked at her, seemingly discontent at the illustrated manuals being put away, but then the dormitory teacher said, “The assessment at the

military base is the day after tomorrow. You two must take in extra nutrients, so hurry and go eat dinner."

Back then, the Garden of Eden's supplies were still very abundant, and it wasn't until children turned ten years old that they were divided into A, B, and C ranks and then sent away. Undoubtedly, Hubbard and Tang Lan would be taken in by the military.

After the Garden of Eden gave out detailed evaluation files, the field operations department had its eyes on them well in advance.

But just like all the unexpected accidents in human history, Tang Lan fell ill on the eve of the selection.

It was an unknown bacterial infection or some other untraceable disease. Whether he could be cured, whether it was contagious, and how to deal with it were all unknown.

As the final means of treatment, the Lighthouse provided all the basic drugs that it could and transferred him to a sealed-off floor so he could heal himself in isolation.

When the dormitory teacher told Hubbard this news, he was doing pull-ups in the training room in preparation for the military selection.

He got down from the horizontal bar and wiped his face with a towel. The expression in his eyes was heavy, and no emotion could be seen. He had always been cold and sparing with his words. The dormitory teacher anxiously looked at him.

“Can you pass on a message to him?" Hubbard asked. “Don't die."

When Tang Lan was confirmed to have healed, the military selection had already been over for two months.

The drugs brought damage to his body, and it was uncertain if it would be permanent. As a result, he lost his qualification to enter the military and

was assigned to the Outer City.

Just before he left, the dormitory teacher packed his luggage for him—a simple box containing antibiotics, bandages, emergency medicine, half a box of multivitamins, a few books and illustrated manuals he often read, and a copy of The Principles of Heroism. He didn't ask who had put it all together.

“Hubbard went to the field operations department and is training in isolation."

He nodded, then picked up the suitcase and got on the train.

If a child of the Outer City was adopted, he'd live with his parents. Those who weren't would live in a collective, and they would not be allowed to leave the city before they came of age. They could take basic education courses that the base offered, do odd jobs, or join a mercenary team and receive training in advance. Having his own ideas, Tang Lan refused to be adopted. He began taking classes and training himself to regain his physical health that had been damaged by the drugs. As the intensity of his training broke through his limits time and again, his body miraculously recovered little by little.

Time passed very quickly, but life was not always smooth sailing.

Tang Lan was good-looking. With black hair and black eyes, his was a sharp-edged handsomeness, the most outstanding kind among Asians. In collective life, there was no shortage of thugs and troublemakers. Fistfights and bullying the weak were common occurrences. He had been beaten and experienced his share of suffering. At first, he didn't have the strength to hit back, but as time passed and his training continued, he could take on three by himself.

Last night, a mercenary from the team he wished to join came to find him and made trouble. He gained a new scar on his right wrist, while the mercenary lost both arms. Earlier today, he put the word out that he better watch himself.

He was not afraid. From a young age, he had never been afraid of much.

Of his own accord, he took up a defensive position at a winding alleyway and spread the news that he had come here to avoid fighting. This place consisted of the remains of unfinished buildings from when the Outer City was being built, so the surroundings were extremely complex. In a fight against many people in an open space, he had no chance of winning. Only in a place like this could he be confident in his success.

He waited on a rooftop around the entrance to the group of buildings and didn't see a soul from noon to midnight. That mercenary was ferocious, the type to get even for the smallest slight, so this was not his style.

In the end, he went downstairs, and the faint sounds of fighting traveled over from afar. He casually hefted a steel bar and cautiously walked toward the end of the alleyway.

By the time he walked over, the sounds of fighting had already stopped.

Outside the alleyway, there was a wall encircling a patch of open space where three people were currently lying flat. Tang Lan jerked his head upward. Within the brief silence, he saw the moonlight and the buildings' shadows cast on the wall, and where black and gray shared a border, someone was leaning against the wall.

Hubbard had a chiseled face, chestnut-colored eyes, and slightly curly black hair. He seldom spoke and was usually expressionless, and combined with the fact that he was taller than other youths his age, people often gave him a wide berth.

He was also very easy to recognize.

Upon seeing Tang Lan arrive, Hubbard lifted his chin, gesturing toward the three people.

Without even looking at them, Tang Lan walked right up to him. “Did you sneak out?"

“No." Hubbard took out a blue ID from his pocket. Using the moonlight, Tang Lan saw that it was the Outer City's type.

“What's going on?" Tang Lan asked.

“I was disciplined," Hubbard said. “I'll be living in the Outer City from now on."

Tang Lan stared at him. “Don't lie to me."

Hubbard put away his ID card, saying nothing.

“What is happening?" Tang Lan did not let him dodge the question at all. “Tell me the truth."

In the distance, ear-piercing sirens cut through the night.

Hubbard asked, “What's wrong?"

Tang Lan was silent for a moment.

“Run," he said.

Afterward, because of that savage fight, the two of them spent a month in the City Defense Agency's jail.

As to exactly why Hubbard had come to the Outer City, Tang Lan did not ask again. Not until many years later, when he and Hubbard were drinking.

As a first-class mercenary, the boss of mercenary team AR137 rarely got drunk. Of course, his vice-captain always had some special tricks to get him drunk.

After several rounds, the man was so drunk that he pitched forward toward the table, and Tang Lan nearly failed to steady him.

“I got to know a field operations department officer at the supply depot,” Tang Lan said in a mild tone as he poured Hubbard another brimming cup of liquor. “Said he was a roommate who had trained with you. He asked me if Hubbard had some political bias, otherwise why would he voluntarily put himself in the Outer City, sacrificing an excellent future? What do you think, Boss?"

“What did I sacrifice?" Hubbard replied only after a long time had passed. “Things are pretty good right now."

“Captain, you're insightful and always victorious.” Tang Lan began knocking back his own drink. “Ten years later, you're humankind's number one frontline commander in the fight against monsters. If you aren't careful, you can still save the world and be a hero."

The alcohol burned so much that his vision went blurry. Upon recalling his recitation of "bravery, steadfastness, self-sacrifice, heroism,” he said to himself, “It seems that you don't particularly yearn to be a hero either."

A breathy sound seemed to come from Hubbard's chest. He was laughing.

“I *have* been one," he suddenly said.

“Been a what?"

“Sacrificed to…”

They were both equally drunk. One could not speak clearly, while the other could not hear clearly. Tang Lan tried hard to get closer to Hubbard, and he finally caught a few syllables.

“To the vice-captain… himself," Hubbard said.

“You've gone nuts," Tang Lan said.

Then he heard Hubbard say, “It's… individual… heroism."

“Motherfucker." With his breath stuck in his chest, Tang Lan gave him a kick. Afterward, he swigged a mouthful of alcohol and smiled.

“Have you read any books before, Hubbard?” he asked. “Can this phrase be used in this way?"

“Welcome to the Highland Research Institute, child."

“Hello, sir."

“Could you describe the process by which you changed into your current form?"

“Let me think."

“Okay."

At night at the research institute, a bonfire was lit on the terrace, illuminating Tang Lan's face. On his left cheek was a line of blue-black scales that had not yet completely receded.

“Around here”—he pointed to an area on a map of the Abyss—“I had an argument with… our captain, regarding whether or not to go deeper."

“I was on the night watch, and my mood was poor. I drove near the perimeter and stayed there.” Recalling the initial scene, Tang Lan's eyes went slightly out of focus. “Then I discovered that monster. It was clearly a large flying-class one, but it was moving close to the ground. Its wingspan was over ten meters wide. As it ran along the ground, slowly climbing up the mountain slope, it made no noise whatsoever, just like a ghost. I almost assumed it was a shadow."

He demonstrated the strange posture of the monster as it traveled by foot, his voice trembling slightly. “I had a gut feeling that it must be very dangerous. I've dealt with monsters for many years and rarely saw this kind… that would make me feel so threatened. Similar things had been recorded in the mercenary handbooks and field guides, all of them fearsome.

“I couldn't take any risks. If we attacked it, perhaps everyone in the team would have died. I didn't know how quickly it could move. If we hastily retreated, it was very likely that we wouldn't have been able to escape at such a distance. I also couldn't warn everyone. If there was movement from our side, it may very well have charged over at high speed," Tang Lan said. “But I was sure that it was charging toward us."

At that point, he took a deep breath. “I didn't have a better alternative."

Pauli asked, “What did you do?"

“The storage compartment door was within my reach. I took out forty pounds of fresh hybrid meat, still bloody, and went in a different direction. Across from me, there was also a mountain," Tang Lan said.

“Monster meat that's undergone the hybridization process has various genes, so it's extremely alluring to monsters," Pauli said.

“That's right, we often used hybrid meat as bait," Tang Lan said. “It was lured in, and I slowly led it in a different direction. After walking for approximately twenty minutes, it began to speed up. I knew with just one look that it had figured out my strength and was preparing to immediately dash over and attack. At this point, we were far away from the camp. I sent them the communication signal to immediately withdraw, then put the meat down and went toward the opposite corner."

“Unfortunately,” he said, “it ate very quickly and had no plans to spare me. I carried a gun with me at all times, but I couldn't drive it off at all."

“Later… I changed into *this*, and I knew that I could never return to the base again." His face was slightly pale as he bowed his head. “But my teammates should've safely withdrawn—at least I hope they did."

“They're definitely safe now.” Pauli gently patted his back. “You were very brave, child. You have the qualities of a hero."

For some reason, that sentence made Tang Lan smile. Then his gaze turned sad.

“Our captain and I were friends for many years, but I always left without bidding farewell. It was the same this time too,” he said. “We probably can't see each other again. This time, there's no place where his individual heroism can be exhibited."

The reinforcements from the Northern Base had arrived at the Highland Research Institute.

The heavy weapons were on the planes, and with Colonel Lu in command of the aerial fighting, the remaining light troops used large hang

gliders to reach the ground. They dispersed in an orderly manner to sweep up the monsters that had attacked the research institute.

Hubbard was in a large open space to the right of the research institute, and behind him were steep cliffs. The scarlet triangle sign erected on the edge of the cliff read, "Slippery slope, do not approach." The main part of the research institute obstructed the majority of his vision. After a small monster was killed by a heavy machine gun, there were no more enemies in the area.

The reason why he came here was because he had looked up into the sky during the skirmish earlier.

A bout of bloody and confused combat was taking place in the sky. A huge monster died and fell to the ground, and when he looked up, he saw a black human figure in midair.

No, not a human. He had a human body, but sprouting from his back were a pair of massive jet-black wings, one of them broken. It was a xenogenic.

When he glimpsed the figure, it was also falling, so it only existed in his field of vision for a single brief second.

But this brief second made his soul go blank.

"Where are you going?" his teammate shouted at him, but he did not hear it clearly. It was like that voice was coming from a faraway place.

Then he rushed frantically to where that person had fallen.

It was a neglected place, with tangles of vines and waist-high weeds growing wildly. On the surface, nothing could be seen, and behind it was a cliff.

His gaze was cold as he stepped in, heavy machine gun in his grasp. Pushing aside the vines, he looked everywhere amidst the waist-high grasses.

A gasp that seemed like an illusion seemed to travel to his ears. He whirled around, but all he saw was the grass swaying in the strong wind.

"Is anyone there?" he shouted.

The gasping seemed to intensify, and the sounds of movement came from over his right shoulder.

He looked in that direction, but his gaze abruptly froze.

A thousand meters away, to the left rear of the research institute building, where the wind turbines were located. Several three-armed turbines were spinning furiously in the strong winds.

At this very moment, several snow-white tentacles covered in thorns had climbed up the turbine towers and entangled the rotating shafts at the centers of the turbines. The tentacles were sturdy and strong, and the rotations of two of the turbines had already ground to an eventual halt.

But the monster's goal was not limited to that, for the thorns and tubercles on its tentacles were standing upright. Hubbard had spent the greater part of his life in the wilderness with his team, and as a battle-seasoned veteran, he knew that that was an expression of the monster's building strength. It was about to uproot the turbines.

The heart of the skirmish was in the open space in front of the research institute, so it was doubtful that anyone would notice the distant turbines. Furthermore, the color of the thing was incredibly similar to the turbines themselves.

Of course, the most important reason was—there was no time.

The third turbine stopped spinning.

The tentacles were already trembling with exertion.

The importance of these turbines was not very clear to Hubbard, but he could imagine it. The research institute's communications equipment and scientific research facilities—including the apparatus that the red sea of flames An Zhe had just walked into depended on—all needed large amounts of power.

He unloaded the large hand-held uranium bomb launcher from his back and took aim. Few individual soldiers could make nimble use of this

weapon. It had plenty of firepower, but its weight was terrible, which made aiming extremely difficult, and the recoil could pulverize an ordinary person's shoulder.

Hubbard knew the vital points of tentacle-class monsters very well, but the research institute building severely hindered his aim, and the vital point was not exposed.

He drew back.

All of his thinking and decision-making were done within three seconds of seeing the monster. He drew back, one step, then another step.

The wind got louder and louder. Within a few short seconds, he had already passed the "do not approach" sign. He glanced backward, seeing the endless sky, and then looked down. He was only one step away from the cliff's edge, and the ground beneath his feet was swaying slightly. There was a clicking noise, as though a pebble had tumbled down.

Just a little bit further. The place where he could kill the monster while not destroying the building and turbines was just a little bit further.

He had never thought about wanting to be a hero. But he still took another step back.

There were more sounds of earth and rock loosening.

The crosshairs of the scope lay right over the monster's vital point.

The type of launcher in his hands had ample penetration, firepower and range.

"Bang—"

The tremendous recoil propelled him backward, the edge of the cliff trembled, and the already-loose rocks fell like an avalanche.

The wind whistled in his ears as he flew backward and began to fall.

His vision was filled with the magnificent daybreak. The sun leapt out from one side of the mountains, and the dazzling golden light struck his retinas. Just after this fleeting moment, another figure appeared from above the cliff and leapt down toward him.

A few drops of blood landed on Hubbard's cheek.

As though he were dreaming.

He reached out—

Tang Lan grabbed him with a hand that was pale from blood loss.

Shadows covered the sky, and bloody wings sprang open. The mountain wind blew eastward. Blood had soaked through the clothes on his chest, and he lacked the strength to fly back up. He simply grabbed Hubbard and glided down on the wind like the paper planes he had folded when he was young.

Hubbard looked at his eyes.

Tang Lan's eyes were still as handsome and chilly as before. There were two scratches on his cheek, and they were oozing blood.

Tang Lan, looking at Hubbard as well, smiled.

There seemed to be much in Hubbard's eyes. He could see it. He wished to ask why he was here and what he had experienced, and he wished even more to ask why he would sacrifice his own life and fall from the cliff along with him.

Tang Lan simply smiled and held Hubbard's hand even more tightly. Hubbard responded to him with the same amount of strength.

All that remained in the world was the howling wind. They were falling toward an unknown destiny, but there was nothing to fear.

"You became a hero once," Tang Lan said. "I'll do the same."

In the distance, the mountains sprawled out.

The rising sun gushed forth.

EPILOGUE - SKYLIGHT

AN ZHE WAS up in the front of the vehicle.

The midday sunlight shone down through the armored vehicle's skylight.

Today was his first day going with Lu Feng into the Abyss.

When humans carried out missions in the wilderness, the armored vehicles served as their mobile encampments. The driver's cabin was up in front. A massive storage space took up three-quarters of the vehicle body, and the remaining quarter was at the bottom, a low-ceilinged and oppressive rest cabin in which one could barely stand up straight. The rest cabin was nominally divided up by thin sheets of metal, two people per compartment, and in the middle there was only a tea table for putting water cups on. Because they had not seen sunlight in a long time, the quilts and pillows carried a slightly musty scent. Before arriving at the human base for the first time, An Zhe had sat in Vance's team's vehicle, and An Ze's memories also contained some impressions related to the armored vehicles. Those impressions all had to do with the narrow, humid, dark, and cramped conditions.

This impression was so deeply ingrained in his mind that in the past, as soon as he thought of how the Colonel would have to rest in the armored vehicle for six months out of the year, he would feel that it was difficult toil.

Maybe when the Colonel got up from the narrow bed in the rest cabin, he would even bump his head against the ceiling.

Then the Colonel would be in a bad mood.

When the Colonel was in a bad mood, the entire team would live beneath a massive shadow, trembling with fear, and nobody would dare to say a single word.

This atmosphere would make the Colonel's mood worsen and then affect his sleep.

So when the Colonel woke up the next morning, due to lack of sleep, his intelligence would decline by a certain extent and his actions would no longer be immaculate and flawless.

… So he would bump his head again.

Thus, the team's journey within the Abyss would be carried out day after day beneath that massive shadow.

On the first night spent in the Colonel's vehicle, there was a beautiful starry sky outside the skylight. In a roomy space, An Zhe sat on a flat bed, hugging a pillow. As a cool and comfortable breeze blew in from the side window, he described his initial fantasies to the Colonel.

The Colonel looked like he had heard something baffling.

An Zhe had predicted his confusion, but he hadn't predicted the issue that the Colonel paid attention to first.

"Why did you think that my intelligence would decline after waking up in the morning?" Lu Feng asked.

"I expected that you hadn't gotten enough sleep that night," An Zhe replied.

"Even if I don't get enough sleep, that kind of scenario wouldn't happen," the Colonel said. "Furthermore, supposing I bump into the ceiling once, there wouldn't be a second time."

"Then that means you really have bumped into it before," An Zhe said.

This time, he triumphed over Lu Feng in their battle of words.

After a short silence, Lu Feng said, "Such a scenario happened only once, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old."

"But no matter what time it is, my mood and intelligence are always very stable."

"Is that so?" An Zhe looked at him suspiciously. "But a while ago, I often noticed that in the morning, you'd be looking at me and not moving at all, as if your thinking speed was very slow."

"That's because you wake up too late." Lu Feng was expressionless. "If you wake up earlier than me, you can look at me."

What he said was unexpectedly very logical. An Zhe turned his back to Lu Feng, expressing his unwillingness to continue conversing. But three minutes later, he couldn't hold back anymore. He asked Lu Feng, "Why are you treated differently from them?"

The Colonel did not sleep in the rest cabin below. His vehicle had obviously been modified; the roomy and bright space above was the Colonel's actual living area. The four walls of the living area were all a beautiful silvery white, there were windows above and on both sides, and in the limited space, even a separate lavatory had been installed.

Next to the bed was a desk, the setup somewhat resembling that of Outer City's standard rooms. The majority of Lu Feng's extremely perfunctory work notebook was completed on that very desk.

In short, this comfortable and bright scene differed from An Zhe's assumptions.

The Colonel said, "One Arbiter went mad inside his vehicle. There were other reasons for his madness, but the supply depot still upgraded the living environments of the later Arbiters."

"They may have wanted you guys to cheer up a bit," An Zhe said.

"Mm," Lu Feng said. "Later on when I led my men, I had the supply depot modify all of the Trial Court's vehicles and add five more vehicles to store materials."

"You're so nice," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng's tone was unusually flat. "Because I discovered that they often bumped their heads, and then they would be in a bad mood."

Hugging the pillow, An Zhe began to laugh.

Unexpectedly, what Lu Feng said next was, "Have you bumped your head before?"

"I haven't," An Zhe said.

He was different from foolish humans.

Then Lu Feng looked him over from top to bottom.

"I forgot," he said. "You lack the qualification for it."

An Zhe felt that if there came a day when his life got snuffed out, it would definitely be because Lu Feng angered him to death.

An Zhe was on the roof of the car.

The dusk sunlight spilled across the armored vehicle's skylight.

Today was his thirtieth day staying with Lu Feng in the Abyss.

In the Abyss, they had discovered a beautiful valley. Slender blades of verdant grass covered the valley soil, which encircled a clear lake.

The almost-translucent grasses were suffused with a weak fluorescence.

"It's so beautiful," An Zhe said as he looked around.

"No. 29 fine-bladed grass," Lu Feng said, "can secrete strongly-corrosive liquid and begins hunting when night falls. We should go now."

An Zhe got down from the skylight's little ladder, and Lu Feng went to the cabin.

The cabin and the living area were connected. An Zhe could see the Colonel at any time even if he was not sitting in the front passenger seat, and normally he would also stay in the areas that the Colonel could see in the rearview mirror.

In the living area, he read for a while, then began to clean. In fact, though, there wasn't much to clean; it could only be described as tidying up.

He closed the Colonel's work notebook, put the ballpoint pen in the pen cup at a forty-five-degree slant to the right, and placed the books he himself had flipped through back in their original spots. Then he folded the small ladder and stored it in an unobtrusive corner, wiped down the tube lights, and folded the quilt into a perfect square. A bit of dust had landed on the windowsill, and although there seemed to be no need to wipe it off, he always felt that the Colonel had a slight obsession with cleanliness—his rooms in the Main City and the City Defense Agency had an almost neurotic simplicity, bare to the point where they didn't seem lived in. So An Zhe carefully wiped away that bit of dust, then wiped it three more times.

After he was done, he looked up and met the gaze of a small bug.

The bug was very small. He recognized this type of creature; it was a firefly, which contained few nutrients and lived in groups. Because they were often accompanied by poisonous mushrooms, within the Abyss they lived relatively well.

At dusk, the little firefly's stomach was aglow with a faint fluorescence. It was very beautiful, and An Zhe liked it a lot. Back when he was purely a mushroom, he had secretly envied those fluorescent mushrooms that could emit light.

But after a moment's hesitation, he nonetheless gently blew the little bug out of the car. As someone he slightly suspected of having an obsession with cleanliness, the Colonel probably wouldn't like bugs in the room, he thought.

After the bug left, he closed the window and began to wipe away the dust on it.

The entire time, he felt like the Colonel was watching him.

Sure enough, three seconds later, the Colonel asked, "How come you've been wiping the window this whole time? Do you have an obsession with

cleanliness?"

An Zhe was rendered speechless.

He turned and left the area that was visible in the rearview mirror.

Over the next three days, An Zhe constantly observed Lu Feng.

First, he discovered that whether the quilt was neatly folded or not would have no effect on the Colonel's mood.

The angle at which the ballpoint pen was placed would have no effect on the Colonel's usage of it either.

Then he deliberately dirtied the desk. At night, when the Colonel saw the tea stain on the desk, he did not show any obvious displeasure. After picking up the cleaning spray and dissolving it, he calmly continued working.

An Zhe began to doubt the importance of his former neurotic cleaning habits.

He felt a little lost.

At bedtime, Lu Feng held him from behind.

"I don't have an obsession with cleanliness. Before, I saw that your rooms were very bare," An Zhe said quietly. "I thought you liked it like that."

Lu Feng kissed his temple.

"Thank you," he said.

An Zhe laid his fingers on Lu Feng's arms, saying nothing.

After a while, Lu Feng said, "I didn't pay attention to it before."

"What about now?" An Zhe asked.

Lu Feng said, "Anything's fine as long as you're comfortable with it."

Pillowed on Lu Feng's arm, An Zhe looked down.

This was only a minor matter, but he had thought about it a lot.

"I just, I just thought..." With some difficulty, he organized his words, his gaze blank. "Sometimes, I don't really understand you."

"It's impossible to completely understand someone," Lu Feng said.

"But..." After saying that, An Zhe's voice trailed off.

Humankind's matters were too numerous, and their emotions were too numerous as well, he thought. Humans were always speculating on and thinking about other humans. Sometimes he really wished that he and Lu Feng could be two mushrooms, blown by the same wind, drenched by the same rain, and spending their entire lifetimes growing together, nothing more.

He turned to face Lu Feng, but Lu Feng got up.

An Zhe watched him, bewildered. The Colonel pulled open the nightstand drawer, took something out, and held it out to him.

In the darkness, it emitted a beautiful pale green fluorescence. Wide-eyed, An Zhe accepted it. It was a glass bottle, and inside it were more than a dozen little fireflies, the same kind as the one he saw that one evening.

They flew around in the transparent glass bottle. Now that it was nighttime, the sky had completely darkened, and those tiny lights were even more beautiful than they had been at dusk.

"Wow," An Zhe said.

He held the bottle tight.

The Colonel said, "For you to play with."

After saying that, he opened the glass bottle, and the fireflies flew out. As they were social creatures, they flew together from one side of the room to the other and from the floor to the ceiling, resembling tiny floating lights as they did so.

An Zhe sat up in bed and grabbed at them a few times. They were a species that had a close relationship with mushrooms, so they did not avoid him, but rather circled around him.

"When did you catch them? I didn't notice." With a smile, he turned back to look at Lu Feng and discovered that the Colonel seemed to have been attentively watching him ever since he took out the glass bottle.

He suddenly got it.

It was impossible for someone to completely understand another person, but humans have always been trying to understand each other.

This was also a type of joy, like being drenched by the same rain.

An Zhe was up against the vehicle door.

Misty drizzle landed on the skylight, turning it all hazy.

This was his third time going with Lu Feng into the Abyss.

He was currently turning into a mushroom.

Hyphae climbed up Lu Feng's clothes, and his shape gradually transformed. After becoming a mushroom and casting off the shackles of his human body, he could freely go here and there in the Abyss.

Halfway through the change, Lu Feng pressed down on his stomach with one hand. The man had always liked to play like this.

Lu Feng asked, "When will you have a baby spore?"

His tone of voice was as natural as if he was asking, "When will you give me a child?"

Of course this wasn't a natural thing.

Firstly, An Zhe could not give birth to children. He could only grow a spore that belonged to himself alone, an endospore, according to Pauli—the embryonic form of a new body.

Secondly, even he himself did not know when he would have a spore. As for when his initial spore had started growing and the reason why it had started growing, he no longer remembered.

He said, "I don't know."

Then he asked, "Do you want a baby spore very badly?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"It's very entertaining."

An Zhe was angered by this man once more.

Was toying with his subconscious really such a joyful thing?

He said, "I won't give it to you to play with."

Lu Feng earnestly rubbed his stomach, as if by doing so he'd be able to speed up the baby spore's growth.

An Zhe couldn't be bothered to acknowledge him. Continuing to change shape, he wound his hyphae securely around the man.

Lu Feng plucked apart some of his hyphae, then tied two wisps of it into a bow. But An Zhe had special knot-untying skills. By reversing the original steps, he untied it.

Lu Feng tied a more complex knot.

An Zhe untied it.

Another knot.

Another untying.

In the end, An Zhe completely retracted those two wisps of hyphae.

This game was so childish, even human younglings would not deign to play it.

Lu Feng laughed softly, then scooped up large clumps of hyphae in order to smooth An Zhe's ruffled strands.

By no means did An Zhe need such a service. Every time Lu Feng smoothed down the hyphae, he retracted some of them. Ten minutes later, his body had shrunk by three-quarters of its usual shape. He was now only the size of a coconut.

Lu Feng seemed to suddenly realize something. He asked, "You can get smaller?"

He could.

This was something An Zhe himself had only recently realized as well. He could control his own size, but he didn't know if it had anything to do with how he used to eat things willy-nilly. He obviously hadn't eaten such things in a long time.

Then he heard Lu Feng ask, "Can you get even smaller?"

An Zhe tried hard to retract his hyphae and became the size of an apple.

With further shrinking, he became the size of a ping-pong ball.

... It seemed that he could still keep going.

Feeling his control over his own hyphae, An Zhe continued getting smaller.

His body suddenly felt weightless as it left the ground.

He was startled, but then he realized that Lu Feng had picked him up.

And after that, he was placed in the chest pocket of Lu Feng's uniform.

With a click, the button snapped into place.

"I'll take you out to play," The Colonel said with a relaxed voice, as though he were in high spirits.

An Zhe was rendered speechless.

The Colonel had definitely obtained some kind of strange joy.

An Zhe was in the vehicle.

The early morning sunlight spilled in through the armored vehicle's skylight.

This was the fourth time he and Lu Feng had gone to the Abyss.

He woke up.

But he did not get out of bed.

He also could not get out of bed.

He wrapped himself up in a quilt and refused to get out until Lu Feng had prepared a cup of milk and placed it in front of him.

Lu Feng asked, "Are you feeling a bit better now?"

An Zhe nodded.

"Does it still hurt?"

An Zhe shook his head.

Then he nodded.

With a slight frown, Lu Feng came over to An Zhe and peeled away the thin quilt that he had wrapped himself with. An Zhe allowed him to peel it away.

The surface of the quilt was made from a delicate fabric, both smooth and soft, yet when compared to the translucent and delicate milk-white skin, it seemed coarse.

But now on the skin there were crisscrossing marks, and just below the left side of his chest was broken skin surrounded by a large patch of red. It had originally been nothing at all. An Zhe had gotten up this morning and put on his shirt, but the fabric just happened to rub against the wound, causing it to sting, and he softly gasped.

Lu Feng pulled open a drawer and took out the alcohol, then dipped a cotton ball in it and cleaned the wound before applying medicine.

So the skin turned red again. An Zhe's skin was too delicate, like the white mushrooms newly grown after the rain, leaking juice with only a pinch.

After the medicine was applied, the area around the wound felt chilly. An Zhe wrapped himself up tightly in the quilt again, and he was pulled into Lu Feng's arms along with the quilt, where he rested his head against Lu Feng's right shoulder, leaning against him.

A little while later, it suddenly occurred to him that this man was the culprit responsible for the wound and that he should not peacefully coexist with him.

An Zhe tried to get away, but he had already been restrained in place.

He struggled fruitlessly, and in the process, the fabric of the quilt rubbed against his wound again.

"Don't move," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

This man's tone of voice was not only lacking the slightest hint of guilt, but it also sounded like he was criticizing him for squirming around. It was extremely hateful.

It just so happened that he could see Lu Feng's neck as soon as he looked up. He ground his teeth.

Then he was hugged even tighter, and he could not move at all anymore.

An Zhe mulled over it and was still very unhappy in the end. It was not a temporary unhappiness, but rather a mood that incrementally developed over many days. He had been constantly wishing to find fault with Lu Feng.

This time, there was finally a wound worth noting.

He mumbled, "You're so mean."

Lu Feng asked, "Am I?"

"Yes."

"No I'm not." Lu Feng pulled him over. "I'm being very attentive."

An Zhe did not know what he was talking about.

Supposing all of this was the aftermath of being attentive, then when you are not being attentive, do you take people apart and eat them?

An Zhe frowned. "That's impossible."

"Hm?"

"When you go too far, I struggle every time," An Zhe said, "and I cry."

Lu Feng looked at him.

"But you ignore me," An Zhe said, "and you even become more mean."

The new day began with criticism from a little mushroom—Lu Feng looked down at the mushroom in his arms.

His voice was soft and delicate as he complained under his breath.

An Zhe finished speaking.

But Lu Feng still wished to hear him talk more.

So he asked, "Is there anything else?"

An Zhe glared at him, the meaning of which was, "Is this not yet enough?"

"I thought that was the way to pay attention to you," Lu Feng replied.

An Zhe was confused.

"Is there anything else?" An Zhe asked.

"Yes," Lu Feng said. "You ought to learn to control yourself."

An Zhe did not know what he was talking about.

He could not possibly have done anything wrong.

He looked straight at Lu Feng, his voice cold as he said clearly, "There's something wrong with you."

"See," Lu Feng said, "you're acting childish again."

An Zhe confirmed that there was indeed a species difference between himself and Lu Feng.

If he could reach over to pick up the pillow, the first thing he would do would be to throw the pillow into Lu Feng's face.

But now his hands were both bound by Lu Feng, so he could only maintain a deadlock with this man with his eyes.

After a while, Lu Feng was the first to smile.

He lowered his head to kiss the corner of An Zhe's lips. An Zhe turned his head to avoid his touch, but he was restrained.

First he found himself tilted up by the chin and deeply kissed a few times, only being released after he could not catch his breath. Then Lu Feng gently kissed the corners of his eyes.

Breaths skimmed past his ear. Lu Feng no longer touched him through the quilt, reaching in with his right hand to grasp An Zhe's waist, where there were certainly still red marks from last night.

An Zhe trembled all over.

He said, "I don't want to."

"I can't hear you."

An Zhe brought up the past again. "Then every time I cry, you can't see it either?"

"It's not like I'm beating you. Crying is useless."

The new day began with unspoken criticism of the Colonel.

An Zhe was still in the vehicle.

Starlight spilled in through the armored vehicle's skylight.

This was the fourth time he and Lu Feng had gone to the Abyss.

The third time An Zhe mumbled on and on to himself, the Colonel put forth a solution.

Without any expression, he leaned against the back of the bed. "Do it yourself."

With an expression and tone of voice that was like he was at the genetic examination office at the city gates, next to the examination device, he said, "Do it yourself."

Facing him, An Zhe hesitated for a while before several strands of hyphae crept onto the Colonel.

Then he leaned down and kissed the Colonel's Adam's apple.

Then he kissed the side of the Colonel's neck and contemplated his next move.

Then it occurred to him that he was wearing loose white pajamas while the Colonel was still neatly dressed, so he began to struggle with the shirt buttons.

He was intimately familiar with this shirt, for he was an emotionless washing machine after all.

But not only did the shirt not open up as a result of their friendship, it was even more difficult to undo because of the angle.

After undoing the first button, he said to Lu Feng, "Undo them yourself."

Just like how Lu Feng would sometimes say to him.

Colonel Lu remained unmoved.

A few more strands of hyphae climbed up.

Humbling himself, the Colonel undid the second button in an unhurried manner.

An Zhe continued to think.

"You're someone who came from the third underground floor," he heard Lu Feng say, his voice slightly hoarse and containing a hint of a smile. "You should be a bit more practiced."

An Zhe was silent.

Then he said in a small voice, "It's not like I learned anything."

And he could not go back and learn again.

"I can see that," Lu Feng said. When this man lowered his voice, it contained a distant magnetism. An Zhe gave a start, feeling numb from his ears to his back.

So he once again recalled the past.

When he first met Lu Feng, he had even personally said "I work on the third underground floor," and the Colonel had responded with an "oh."

An Zhe was very curious about the impression the Colonel had of him at that time.

Seeming to understand him, the Colonel said, "I didn't know you were a mushroom then. I thought that if you didn't work on the third floor, there'd be no way for you to survive in the base."

He nonchalantly glanced at An Zhe, then continued. "Now it seems that even so, you can't support yourself."

The number of hyphae increased.

The Colonel stopped talking.

Right now, An Zhe's greatest wish was that the Colonel would be like that of his mannequin, unable to say a single word.

He lay his slender white fingers on Lu Feng's chest, waiting for the other man to finish undoing the buttons so he could hold his hand.

Then he saw the Colonel look at that place, seemingly also contemplating—and it was the kind of expression he only had when contemplating something serious.

A few seconds later, Lu Feng said, "In the past, you deceived me."

An Zhe tilted his head.

"Slow on the uptake, ignorant of what the crime of indecency is, doing illegal work with monthly wages lower than the baseline." The Colonel listed these three items, seemingly deep in thought. "These can't be explained by excessive simple-mindedness and limited intelligence."

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

He said, "Stop right there."

But it was obvious that the Colonel's hearing would selectively stop working.

"That night was also very unusual. You invited me to stay in your room."

An Zhe said, "That was because you had nowhere to go."

"The problem lay with how you wanted to give your toothbrush to me. You didn't understand human social etiquette at all."

An Zhe said nothing, as though his hearing had also selectively stopped working.

"Unless that was a clumsy flirting method you learned on the third floor… But that night, you were very well behaved," the Colonel said.

An Zhe knew the Colonel was talking about the night of Judgment Day, when he had invited this man to sleep for a night in his room.

He went to hold Lu Feng, pressing his forehead against the other man's chest. Even through a layer of fabric, there was a warm and solid sensation, and he could hear a steady heartbeat in his ears. All sorts of things had happened, just like a dream.

An Zhe imagined another possibility.

"Then," An Zhe said, "supposing that, at that time…"

Supposing that, at that time, it truly was a coincidental mistake—

If he truly was a worker on the third underground floor, or if he had mindlessly followed Mr. Shaw's suggestion, using another method to get close to the Arbiter—what would he have done that night?

The xenogenic with ulterior motives took in the Arbiter who had nowhere to return to.

When they did not yet know each other well and were even on their guard against the other.

But it was also at a time full of death, unrest, and abandonment.

Supposing that, at that time, An Zhe had leaned over to kiss Lu Feng on the lips or undid the buttons of his coat, what would they have been like?

An Zhe didn't know.

He only knew that to this day, when he thought of Lu Feng's back on the night of Judgment Day, his heart would violently tremble. He looked at those green eyes and seemed to return to that moment, when the blood-scented evening wind howled through the city.

So that expression appeared on his face again.

A quiet, grief-laden expression.

God did not love the world.

God loved the world.

The bed, the desk, and the decorations here used to be like the base's standard rooms. At night, the room darkened. The sound of the wind came from an unknown place, much like that night.

The An Zhe from that time was also like this, with snow-white soft cotton pajamas and an innocent face.

Lu Feng put a hand on his shoulder, his gaze seeming tangible. An Zhe first dropped his gaze slightly, then lifted it again to meet his eyes. His eyelashes also trembled slightly, like the minute shake of flowers and leaves when a butterfly perched upon them.

Lu Feng stared at him for a long time, as though he were staring at the twilight above fields of snow.

Until this twilight descended, and An Zhe leaned over to kiss him on the corner of his lips.

Soundlessly, he moved to kiss him on the lips.

The past flickered out.

THE MUSHROOM'S DIARY

NEWS HAS COME from the Northern Base. Beneath the ruins of the Main City, they plan to establish a human history museum in the center of the ventilation ducts, which avoided being blown up by a stroke of luck. For this reason, they're asking for almost everyone's memoirs. Many of the people at the research institute have handed theirs in.

But Lu Feng hasn't.

He doesn't have a memoir, nor does he write in a diary. His work notebook was equivalent to a diary, but those words were too slapdash, and it has already been lost.

In all of humankind's records thus far, the Arbiter himself has not left behind any words whatsoever.

However, amidst humankind's records, there's no shortage of writings and discussions about him. Humans think their history is like a long flowing river. He doesn't speak, hiding within this long river, yet he seems to be behind the shadow of every single ripple.

Once many years have gone by, how would people think of him? Would there be people who love him? Would there be people who hate him? Would there be people who doubt that he existed?

What can I do to make him more real?

I don't know.

He's loved people before. His mother, his friends, his subordinates. He hasn't hated anyone before, though.

He also likes humankind, but there were at least two times in which he felt bone-deep loneliness amidst the crowds. The first time was on Judgment Day at the city gates, and the second time was when the Arbiter's mannequin was shot by the opposition faction. At that time, would he have felt lost? What would have caused him to feel lost? The crowd that didn't understand him? Himself? All of humankind? Or the fact that humans would never be able to understand each other?

I don't know.

Every time I think of these things, I feel so upset that I cannot speak.

There will also be some times when I think, why are he and I always together? Will he be able to free himself from eternal loneliness by holding my hyphae in his hand? I can talk with him, but what can we talk about? He and I are the two most dissimilar people, and the people of the research institute have never been able to understand why we are able to peacefully coexist.

I asked Pauli, and Pauli said, "Actually, you're the two most similar people in this world."

I didn't understand.

Pauli said, "Once you get a little older, when you reach the age where you can look back on the past, you'll understand."

But at that point in time, where would he be? And where would I be?

We'll probably be traveling around the world together, I suppose.

All right, I'll stop writing here.

I have to go prepare a New Year's gift for him.

THE COLONEL'S DIARY

THE MUSHROOM SAID that my diary was too slapdash, but his is by no means honest either.

What he says he doesn't know, he actually knows all of it.

Childish.

A QUESTION

THE ENGINE ROARED, and beneath the clear winter sunlight, the powerful airflow of the massive fighter plane lifted the snow on the ground, sending it flying along with dirt and dust. Lu Feng walked toward it, and the crew commander's voice came from the walkie-talkie. "News has come from the Northern Base. Monsters have invaded for the first time since winter began, and the scale is of an unprecedented large size, so the base is continuing to ask for reinforcements. Let's hurry."

After the final "bell toll," the Northern Base's military forces were divided into two branches. One part stayed at the original base, while the other part was stationed at the Highland Research Institute to assist with the collection of samples of living things from the Abyss and advance the research of substance frequencies. Since the base and the research institute had reached an accord, it was only natural that the Northern Base would seek the Highland troops' aid upon being attacked.

But, An Zhe thought—

If it weren't for such a crucial pressing task, he doubted that Lu Feng would have ever returned to the Northern Base again in this lifetime. In other words, he had assumed Lu Feng had no plans of going back to that place, but after receiving the emergency mission, the Colonel still chose to walk toward the PL1109's landing pad.

Just like that similarly dusty day three years ago, when he went to the PL1109 and went to the Underground City Base across the ocean.

Because he was thinking, he fell a few steps behind. It just so happened that he could see the back view of Lu Feng up ahead, which was identical to that earlier time. The Colonel always went toward the unknown like this, never looking back.

Just as An Zhe had that thought, he saw the Colonel turn around and look at him. Beneath the silvery sky, a chilly and beautiful facial profile.

An Zhe looked at him while standing in place.

"What are you thinking about?" the Colonel asked.

Only then did An Zhe walk over, catching up to him.

"You're really handsome," he said in a small voice.

Then he saw the Colonel smile.

It was like the fluttering of the aurora or the drifting of snowflakes. The Colonel rarely smiled so obviously.

So An Zhe also asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I was recalling that time at the base," the Colonel said, "when the incident at the Underground City Base happened."

Surprisingly, this man was thinking of that time as well. Saying nothing, An Zhe listened to him continue.

"I saw you before I left," he said.

An Zhe hummed in response. He remembered that they had touched upon the matter of the mushroom soup, and then the Colonel had told him to take care of himself.

He said, "You also said that you may not be able to return."

"That sounds right," the Colonel said. "It felt like you were worried about me and thus said a few extra things."

"Just one thing," An Zhe replied.

The Colonel smiled again.

The light reflecting off the snow illuminated the silver badge on his combat uniform. The combat uniform was black camo, black fingerless gloves, and a tactical vest. It gave the feeling of a casual yet clean strength, unlike the uniforms worn in peacetime.

"There was indeed something left unsaid," Lu Feng said. "I wanted to ask you—"

He cut himself off.

An Zhe asked him, "What?"

Lu Feng was expressionless, seemingly weighing his words.

So An Zhe became even more curious. Just as he thought that the Colonel was going to say something of vital importance and great depth—

The Colonel gestured to himself with his gun and asked, "Do I look good?"

BASE CHRONICLES

IN 2020, the geomagnetic field began to swiftly weaken.

That same year, in Asia, Plan A—constructing a simulated geomagnetic field—began.

That same year, in North America, Plan B—constructing the humans' underground city—began.

In 2030, the geomagnetic field disappeared, so the biosphere fell into dysfunction, the climate changed dramatically, and the solar radiation was abnormal. The "Desert Age" had begun.

In 2040, Plan B was successful, and the underground city was opened up to inhabitants.

In 2043, Plan A was successful, and a weak magnetic field covered the entire world.

In 2045, with the marine life of the Pacific Ocean at the center, species all over the world mutated. The "Calamity Age" had arrived, and the war began.

That same year, construction of the Northern Base and Southeastern Base were completed.

That same year, the Underground City Base assisted in the construction of the Virginia Base.

In 2050, in the war, humankind suffered tremendous losses, and the "Fusion Faction" was established.

In 2053, humans observed widespread genetic mutations, and birth rates plummeted.

In 2061, there was a mutant rodent upsurge, and the Southeastern Base fell.

In 2066, the women of humankind's four bases voted unanimously to pass the Rose Manifesto. The bases introduced a fertility scoring system, and women with a score above 60 signed an agreement with the bases to voluntarily subject themselves to artificial insemination.

In 2067, at the Northern Base, "Judgment Day" occurred. The Arbiter's Code was introduced. Holding the license to kill people, the Arbiter indiscriminately shot all who were contaminated.

In 2070, the Fusion Faction defected, and the Highland Research Institute was established.

In 2073, the Virginia Base fell.

In 2115, at the Northern Base, the "Rose Incident" broke out. Women united to revolt against the base's envious crushing grasp on fertility. The base suppressed it, and all women with a score over 60 were confined in the "Garden of Eden."

In 2135, communication conditions deteriorated even further. The Northern Base and Underground City base closed the daily communication channel, leaving only the emergency channel open.

In 2150, the Northern Base's population experienced steady growth, and the "Recovery Age" began.

In 2154, genetic examination technology matured.

The story begins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shisi is a Jinjiang Wenxuecheng contract author who began serializing web novels in 2016. Specializing in fantasy, Shisi has a dynamic writing style and has also written xianxia, sci-fi, and other genres. Aside from her most famous work, Little Mushroom, her other published titles include Cultivating in C, The Cat's Rose, and Zhezhu. Many of Shisi's novels have been licensed for multimedia adaptations.